HELBECK OF BANNISDALE

MRS HUMPHRY WARD

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HELBECK OF BANNISDALE

VOLUME I.


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HELBECK OF BANNISDALE

BY

MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

. . . metus ille . . . Acheruntis . . .
Funditus humanam qui vitam turbat ab imo

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

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HELBECK OF BANNISDALE

BOOK I

CHAPTER I

"I MUST be turning back. A dreary day for anyone coming fresh to these parts!"

So saying, Mr. Helbeck stood still — both hands resting on his thick stick — while his gaze slowly swept the straight white road in front of him and the landscape to either side.

Before him stretched the marsh lands of the Flent valley, a broad alluvial plain brought down by the rivers Flent and Greet on their way to the estuary and the sea. From the slight rising ground on which he stood, he could see the great peat mosses about the river-mouths, marked here and there by lines of weather-beaten trees, or by more solid dots of black which the eye of the inhabitant knew to be peat stacks. Beyond the mosses were level lines of greyish white, where the looping rivers passed into the sea — lines more luminous than the sky at this particular moment of a damp March afternoon, because of

some otherwise invisible radiance, which, miles away, seemed to be shining upon the water, slipping down to it from behind a curtain of rainy cloud.

Nearer by, on either side of the high road which cut the valley from east to west, were black and melancholy fields, half reclaimed from the peat moss, fields where the water stood in the furrows, or a plough driven deep and left, showed the nature of the heavy water-logged earth, and the farmer's despair of dealing with it, till the drying winds should come. Some of it, however, had long before been reclaimed for pasture, so that strips of sodden green broke up, here and there, the long stretches of purple black. In the great dykes or drains to which the pastures were due, the water, swollen with recent rain, could be seen hurrying to join the rivers and the sea. The clouds overhead hurried like the dykes and the streams. A perpetual procession from the north-west swept inland from the sea, pouring from the dark distance of the upper valley, and blotting out the mountains that stood around its head.

A desolate scene, on this wild March day; yet full of a sort of beauty, even so far as the mosslands were concerned. And as Alan Helbeck's glance travelled along the ridge to his right, he saw it gradually rising from the marsh in slopes, and scars, and wooded fells, a medley of lovely lines, of pastures

and copses, of villages clinging to the hills, each with its church tower and its white spreading farms — a land of homely charm and comfort, gently bounding the marsh below it, and cut off by the seething clouds in the north-west from the mountains towards which it climbed. And as he turned homewards with the moss country behind him, the hills rose and fell about him in soft undulation more and more rich in wood, while beside him roared the tumbling Greet, with its flood-voice — a voice more dear and familiar to Alan Helbeck perhaps, at this moment of his life, than the voice of any human being.

He walked fast with his shoulders thrown back, a remarkably tall man, with a dark head and short grizzled beard. He held himself very erect, as a soldier holds himself; but he had never been a soldier.

Once in his rapid course, he paused to look at his watch, then hurried on, thinking.

"She stipulates that she is never to be expected to come to prayers," he repeated to himself, half smiling. "I suppose she thinks of herself as representing her father — in a nest of Papists. Evidently Augustina has no chance with her — she has been accustomed to reign! Well, we shall let her 'gang her gait.'"

His mouth, which was full and strongly closed, took a slight expression of contempt. As he turned

over a bridge, and then into his own gate on the further side, he passed an old labourer who was scraping the mud from the road.

"Have you seen any carriage go by just lately, Reuben?"

"Noa—" said the man. "Theer's been none this last hour an more — nobbut carts, an t' Whinthrupp bus."

Helbeck's pace slackened. He had been very solitary all day, and even the company of the old road-sweeper was welcome.

"If we don't get some drying days soon, it'll be bad for all of us, won't it, Reuben?"

"Aye, it's a bit clashy," said the man, with stolidity, stopping to spit into his hands a moment, before resuming his work.

The mildness of the adjective brought another half-smile to Helbeck's dark face. A stranger watching it might have wondered, indeed, whether it could smile with any fulness or spontaneity.

"But you don't see any good in grumbling — is that it?"

"Noa — we'se not git ony profit that gate, I reckon," said the old man, laying his scraper to the mud once more.

"Well, good-night to you. I'm expecting my sister to-night, you know, my sister Mrs. Fountain, and her stepdaughter."

"Eh?" said Reuben slowly. "Then yo'll be hevin cumpany, fer shure. Good-neet to ye, Misther Helbeck."

But there was no great cordiality in his tone, and he touched his cap carelessly, without any sort of unction. The man's manner expressed familiarity of long habit, but little else.

Helbeck turned into his own park. The road that led up to the house wound alongside the river, whereof the banks had suddenly risen into a craggy wildness. All recollection of the marshland was left behind. The ground mounted on either side of the stream towards fell-tops, of which the distant lines could be seen dimly here and there behind the crowding trees; while, at some turns of the road, where the course of the Greet made a passage for the eye, one might look far away to the same mingled blackness of cloud and scar that stood round the head of the estuary. Clearly the mountains were not far off; and this was a border country between their ramparts and the sea.

The light of the March evening was dying, dying in a stormy greyness that promised more rain for the morrow. Yet the air was soft, and the spring made itself felt. In some sheltered places by the water, one might already see a shimmer of buds; and in the grass of the wild untended park, daffodils were springing. Helbeck was conscious of it all; his eye and ear

were on the watch for the signs of growth, and for the birds that haunted the river, the dipper on the stone, the grey wagtail slipping to its new nest in the bank, the golden-crested wren, or dark-backed creeper moving among the thorns. He loved such things; though with a silent and jealous love that seemed to imply some resentment towards other things and forces in his life.

As he walked, the manner of the old peasant rankled a little in his memory. For it implied, if not disrespect, at least a complete absence of all that the French call "consideration."

"It's strange how much more alone I've felt in this place of late than I used to feel," was Helbeck's reflection upon it, at last. "I reckon it's since I sold the Leasowes land. Or is it perhaps ——"

He fell into a reverie marked by a frowning expression, and a harsh drawing down of the mouth. But gradually as he swung along, muttered words began to escape him, and his hand went to a book that he carried in his pocket. — "*O dust, learn of Me to obey! Learn of Me, O earth and clay, to humble thyself, and to cast thyself under the feet of all men for the love of Me.*" — As he murmured the words, which soon became inaudible, his aspect cleared, his eyes raised themselves again to the landscape, and became once more conscious of its growth and life.

Presently he reached a gate across the road, where a big sheepdog sprang out upon him, leaping and barking joyously. Beyond the gates rose a low pile of buildings, standing round three sides of a yard. They had once been the stables of the Hall. Now they were put to farm uses, and through the door of what had formerly been a coachhouse with a coat of arms worked in white pebbles on its floor, a woman could be seen milking. Helbeck looked in upon her.

"No carriage gone by yet, Mrs. Tyson?"

"Noa, sir," said the woman. "But I'll mebbe prop t' gate open, for it's aboot time." And she put down her pail.

"Don't move!" said Helbeck hastily. "I'll do it myself."

The woman, as she milked, watched him propping the ruinous gate with a stone; her expression all the time friendly and attentive. His own people, women especially, somehow always gave him this attention.

Helbeck hurried forward over a road, once stately, and now badly worn and ill-mended. The trees, mostly oaks of long growth, which had accompanied him since the entrance of the park, thickened to a close wood around till of a sudden he emerged from them, and there, across a wide space, rose a grey gabled house, sharp against a hillside, with a rainy evening light full upon it.

It was an old and weather-beaten house, of a singular character and dignity; yet not large. It was built of grey stone, covered with a rough-cast, so tempered by age to the colour and surface of the stone, that the many patches where it had dropped away produced hardly any disfiguring effect. The rugged "pele" tower, origin and source of all the rest, was now grouped with the gables and projections, the broad casemented windows, and deep doorways of a Tudor manor-house. But the whole structure seemed still to lean upon and draw towards the tower; and it was the tower which gave accent to a general expression of austerity, depending perhaps on the plain simplicity of all the approaches and immediate neighbourhood of the house. For in front of it were neither flowers nor shrubs — only wide stretches of plain turf and gravel; while behind it, beyond some thin intervening trees, rose a grey limestone fell, into which the house seemed to withdraw itself, as into the rock, "whence it was hewn."

There were some lights in the old windows, and the heavy outer door was open. Helbeck mounted the steps and stood, watch in hand, at the top of them, looking down the avenue he had just walked through. And very soon, in spite of the roar of the river, his ear distinguished the wheels he was listening for. While they approached, he could not keep himself

still, but moved restlessly about the little stone platform. He had been solitary for many years, and had loved his solitude.

"They're just coomin', sir," said the voice of his old housekeeper, as she threw open an inner door behind him, letting a glow of fire and candles stream out into the twilight. Helbeck meanwhile caught sight for an instant of a girl's pale face at the window of the approaching carriage — a face thrust forward eagerly, to gaze at the pele tower.

The horses stopped, and out sprang the girl.

"Wait a moment — let me help you, Augustina. How do you do, Mr. Helbeck? Don't touch my dog, please — she doesn't like men. Fricka, be quiet!"

For the little black spitz she held in a chain had begun to growl and bark furiously at the first sight of Helbeck, to the evident anger of the old housekeeper, who looked at the dog sourly as she went forward to take some bags and rugs from her master. Helbeck, meanwhile, and the young girl helped another lady to alight. She came out slowly with the precautions of an invalid, and Helbeck gave her his arm.

At the top of the steps she turned and looked round her.

"Oh, Alan!" she said, "it is so long ——"

Her lips trembled, and her head shook oddly. She was a short woman, with a thin plaintive face and a

nervous jerk of the head, always very marked at a moment of agitation. As he noticed it, Helbeck felt times long past rush back upon him. He laid his hand over hers, and tried to say something; but his shyness oppressed him. When he had led her into the broad hall, with its firelight and stuccoed roof, she said, turning round with the same bewildered air —

"You saw Laura? You have never seen her before!"

"Oh yes; we shook hands, Augustina," said a young voice. "Will Mr. Helbeck please help me with these things?"

She was laden with shawls and packages, and Helbeck hastily went to her aid. In the emotion of bringing his sister back into the old house, which she had left fifteen years before, when he himself was a lad of two-and-twenty, he had forgotten her step-daughter.

But Miss Fountain did not intend to be forgotten. She made him relieve her of all burdens, and then argue an overcharge with the flyman. And at last, when all the luggage was in and the fly was driving off, she mounted the steps deliberately, looking about her all the time, but principally at the house. The eyes of the housekeeper, who with Mr. Helbeck was standing in the entrance awaiting her, surveyed both dog and mistress with equal disapproval.

But the dusk was fast passing into darkness, and it was not till the girl came into the brightness of the hall, where her stepmother was already sitting tired and drooping on a settle near the great wood fire, that Helbeck saw her plainly.

She was very small and slight, and her hair made a spot of pale gold against the oak panelling of the walls. Helbeck noticed the slenderness of her arms, and the prettiness of her little white neck, then the freedom of her quick gesture as she went up to the elder lady and with a certain peremptoriness began to loosen her cloak.

"Augustina ought to go to bed directly," she said, looking at Helbeck. "The journey tired her dreadfully."

"Mrs. Fountain's room is quite ready," said the housekeeper, holding herself stiffly behind her master. She was a woman of middle age, with a pinkish face, framed between two tiers of short grey curls.

Laura's eye ran over her.

"*You* don't like our coming!" she said to herself. Then to Helbeck —

"May I take her up at once? I will unpack, and put her comfortable. Then she ought to have some food. She has had nothing to-day but some tea at Lancaster."

Mrs. Fountain looked up at the girl with feeble

acquiescence, as though depending on her entirely. Helbeck glanced from his pale sister to the housekeeper in some perplexity.

"What will you have?" he said nervously to Miss Fountain. "Dinner, I think, was to be at a quarter to eight."

"That was the time I was ordered, sir," said Mrs. Denton.

"Can't it be earlier?" asked the girl impetuously.

Mrs. Denton did not reply, but her shoulders grew visibly rigid.

"Do what you can for us, Denton," said her master hastily, and she went away. Helbeck bent kindly over his sister.

"You know what a small establishment we have, Augustina. Mrs. Denton, a rough girl, and a boy — that's all. I do trust they will be able to make you comfortable."

"Oh, let me come down, when I have unpacked, and help cook," said Miss Fountain brightly. "I can do anything of that sort."

Helbeck smiled for the first time. "I am afraid Mrs. Denton wouldn't take it kindly. She rules us all in this old place."

"I dare say," said the girl quietly. "It's fish, of course?" she added, looking down at her stepmother, and speaking in a meditative voice.

"It's a Friday's dinner," said Helbeck, flushing suddenly, and looking at his sister, "except for Miss Fountain. I supposed ——"

Mrs. Fountain rose in some agitation and threw him a piteous look.

"Of course you did, Alan — of course you did. But the doctor at Folkestone — he was a Catholic — I took such care about that! — told me I mustn't fast. And Laura is always worrying me. But indeed I didn't want to be dispensed! — not yet!"

Laura said nothing; nor did Helbeck. There was a certain embarrassment in the looks of both, as though there was more in Mrs. Fountain's words than appeared. Then the girl, holding herself erect and rather defiant, drew her stepmother's arm in hers, and turned to Helbeck.

"Will you please show us the way up?"

Helbeck took a small hand-lamp and led the way, bidding the newcomers beware of the slipperiness of the old polished boards. Mrs. Fountain walked with caution, clinging to her stepdaughter. At the foot of the staircase she stopped, and looked upward.

"Alan, I don't see much change!"

He turned back, the light shining on his fine harsh face and grizzled hair.

"Don't you? But it is greatly changed, Augustina. We have shut up half of it."

Mrs. Fountain sighed deeply and moved on. Laura, as she mounted the stairs, looked back at the old hall, its ceiling of creamy stucco, its panelled walls, and below, the great bare floor of shining oak with hardly any furniture upon it — a strip of old carpet, a heavy oak table, and a few battered chairs at long intervals against the panelling. But the big fire of logs piled upon the hearth filled it all with cheerful light, and under her indifferent manner, the girl's sense secretly thrilled with pleasure. She had heard much of "poor Alan's" poverty. Poverty! As far as his house was concerned, at any rate, it seemed to her of a very tolerable sort.

In a few minutes Helbeck came downstairs again, and stood absently before the fire on the hearth. After a while, he sat down beside it in his accustomed chair — a carved chair of black Westmoreland oak — and began to read from the book which he had been carrying in his pocket out of doors. He read with his head bent closely over the pages, because of short sight; and, as a rule, reading absorbed him so completely that he was conscious of nothing external while it lasted. To-night, however, he several times looked up to listen to the sounds overhead, unwonted sounds in this house, over which, as it often seemed to him, a quiet of centuries had settled down, like a

fine dust or deposit, muffling all its steps and voices. But there was nothing muffled in the voice overhead which he caught every now and then, through an open door, escaping, eager and alive, into the silence; or in the occasional sharp bark of the dog.

"Horrid little wretch!" thought Helbeck. "Denton will loathe it. Augustina should really have warned me. What shall we do if she and Denton don't get on? It will never answer if she tries meddling in the kitchen — I must tell her."

Presently, however, his inner anxieties grew upon him so much that his book fell on his knee, and he lost himself in a multitude of small scruples and torments, such as beset all persons who live alone. Were all his days now to be made difficult, because he had followed his conscience, and asked his widowed sister to come and live with him?

"Augustina and I could have done well enough. But this girl — well, we must put up with it — we must, Bruno!"

He laid his hand as he spoke on the neck of a collie that had just lounged into the hall, and come to lay its nose upon his master's knee. Suddenly a bark from overhead made the dog start back and prick its ears.

"Come here, Bruno — be quiet. You're to treat that little brute with proper contempt — do you hear?

Listen to all that scuffling and talking upstairs — that's the new young woman getting her way with old Denton. Well, it won't do Denton any harm. We're put upon sometimes, too, aren't we?"

And he caressed the dog, his haughty face alive with something half bitter, half humorous.

At that moment the old clock in the hall struck a quarter past seven. Helbeck sprang up.

"Am I to dress?" he said to himself in some perplexity.

He considered for a moment or two, looking at his shabby serge suit, then sat down again resolutely.

"No! She'll have to live our life. Besides, I don't know what Denton would think."

And he lay back in his chair, recalling with some amusement the criticisms of his housekeeper upon a young Catholic friend of his who — rare event — had spent a fishing week with him in the autumn, and had startled the old house and its inmates with his frequent changes of raiment. "It's yan set o' cloas for breakfast, an anudther for fishin, an anudther for ridin, an yan for when he cooms in, an a fine suit for dinner — an anudther for smoakin — A should think he mut be oftener naked nor donned!" Denton had said in her grim Westmoreland, and Helbeck had often chuckled over the remark.

An hour later, half an hour after the usual time,

Helbeck, all the traces of his muddy walk removed, and garbed with scrupulous neatness in the old black coat and black tie he always wore of an evening, was sitting opposite to Miss Fountain at supper.

"You got everything you wanted for Augustina, I hope?" he said to her shyly as they sat down. He had awaited her in the dining-room itself, so as to avoid the awkwardness of taking her in. It was some years since a woman had stayed under his roof, or since he had been a guest in the same house with women.

"Oh yes!" said Miss Fountain. But she threw a sly swift glance towards Mrs. Denton, who was just coming into the room with some coffee, then compressed her lips and studied her plate. Helbeck detected the glance, and saw too that Mrs. Denton's pink face was flushed, and her manner discomposed.

"The coffee's noa good," she said abruptly, as she put it down; "I couldn't keep to 't."

"No, I'm afraid we disturbed Mrs. Denton dreadfully," said Miss Fountain, shrugging her shoulders. "We got her to bring up all sorts of things for Augustina. She was dreadfully tired — I thought she would faint. The doctor scolded me before we left, about letting her go without food. Shall I give you some fish, Mr. Helbeck?"

For, to her astonishment, the fish even — a very

small portion — was placed before herself, side by side with a few fragments of cold chicken; and she looked in vain for a second plate.

As she glanced across the table, she caught a momentary shade of embarrassment in Helbeck's face.

"No, thank you," he said. "I am provided."

His provision seemed to be coffee and bread and butter. She raised her eyebrows involuntarily, but said nothing, and he presently busied himself in bringing her vegetables and wine, Mrs. Denton having left the room.

"I trust you will make a good meal," he said gravely, as he waited upon her. "You have had a long day."

"Oh, yes!" said Miss Fountain impetuously, "and please don't ever make any difference for me on Fridays. It doesn't matter to me in the least what I eat."

Helbeck offered no reply. Conversation between them indeed did not flow very readily. They talked a little about the journey from London; and Laura asked a few questions about the house. She was, indeed, studying the room in which they sat, and her host himself, all the time. "He may be a saint," she thought, "but I am sure he knows all the time there are very few saints of such an old family! His head's splendid — so dark and fine — with the great waves

of grey-black hair — and the long features and the pointed chin. He's immensely tall too — six feet two at least — taller than father. He looks hard and bigoted. I suppose most people would be afraid of him — I'm not!"

And as though to prove even to herself she was not, she carried on a rattle of questions. How old was the tower? How old was the room in which they were sitting? She looked round it with ignorant, girlish eyes.

He pointed her to the date on the carved mantelpiece — 1583.

"That is a very important date for us," he began, then checked himself.

"Why?"

He seemed to find a difficulty in going on, but at last he said:

"The man who put up that chimney-piece was hanged at Manchester later in the same year."

"Why? — what for?"

He suddenly noticed the delicacy of her tiny wrist as her hand paused at the edge of her plate, and the brilliance of her eyes — large and greenish-grey, with a marked black line round the iris. The very perception perhaps made his answer more cold and measured.

"He was a Catholic recusant, under Elizabeth. He

had harboured a priest, and he and the priest and a friend suffered death for it together at Manchester. Afterwards their heads were fixed on the outside of Manchester parish church."

"How horrible!" said Miss Fountain, frowning. "Do you know anything more about him?"

"Yes, we have letters ——"

But he would say no more, and the subject dropped. Not to let the conversation also come to an end, he pointed to some old gilded leather which covered one side of the room, while the other three walls were oak-panelled from ceiling to floor.

"It is very dim and dingy now," said Helbeck; "but when it was fresh, it was the wonder of the place. The room got the name of Paradise from it. There are many mentions of it in the old letters."

"Who put it up?"

"The brother of the martyr — twenty years later."

"The martyr!" she thought, half scornfully. "No doubt he is as proud of that as of his twenty generations!"

He told her a few more antiquarian facts about the room, and its builders, she meanwhile looking in some perplexity from the rich embossments of the ceiling with its Tudor roses and crowns, from the stately mantelpiece and canopied doors, to the few pieces of shabby modern furniture which disfigured the room,

the half-dozen cane chairs, the ugly lodging-house carpet and sideboard. What had become of the old furnishings? How could they have disappeared so utterly?

Helbeck, however, did not enlighten her. He talked indeed with no freedom, merely to pass the time.

She perfectly recognised that he was not at ease with her, and she hurried her meal, in spite of her very frank hunger, that she might set him free. But, as she was putting down her coffee-cup for the last time, she suddenly said:

"It's a very good air here, isn't it, Mr. Helbeck?"

"I believe so," he replied, in some surprise. "It's a mixture of the sea and the mountains. Everybody here — most of the poor people — live to a great age."

"That's all right! Then Augustina will soon get strong here. She can't do without me yet — but you know, of course — I have decided — about myself?"

Somehow, as she looked across to her host, her little figure, in its plain white dress and black ribbons, expressed a curious tension. "She wants to make it very plain to me," thought Helbeck, "that if she comes here as my guest, it is only as a favour, to look after my sister."

Aloud he said:

"Augustina told me she could not hope to keep you for long."

"No!" said the girl sharply. "No! I must take up a profession. I have a little money, you know, from papa. I shall go to Cambridge, or to London, perhaps to live with a friend. Oh! you darling! — you *darling!*"

Helbeck opened his eyes in amazement. Miss Fountain had sprung from her seat, and thrown herself on her knees beside his old collie Bruno. Her arms were round the dog's neck, and she was pressing her cheek against his brown nose. Perhaps she caught her host's look of astonishment, for she rose at once in a flush of some feeling she tried to put down, and said, still holding the dog's head against her dress:

"I didn't know you had a dog like this. It's so like ours — you see — like papa's. I had to give ours away when we left Folkestone. You dear, dear thing!" — (the caressing intensity in the girl's young voice made Helbeck shrink and turn away) — "now you won't kill my Fricka, will you? She's curled up, such a delicious black ball, on my bed; you couldn't — you couldn't have the heart! I'll take you up and introduce you — I'll do everything proper!"

The dog looked up at her, with its soft, quiet eyes, as though it weighed her pleadings.

"There," she said triumphantly. "It's all right — he winked. Come along, my dear, and let's make real friends."

And she led the dog into the hall, Helbeck ceremoniously opening the door for her.

She sat herself down in the oak settle beside the hall fire, where for some minutes she occupied herself entirely with the dog, talking a sort of baby language to him that left Helbeck absolutely dumb. When she raised her head, she flung, dartlike, another question at her host.

"Have you many neighbours, Mr. Helbeck?"

Her voice startled his look away from her.

"Not many," he said, hesitating. "And I know little of those there are."

"Indeed! Don't you like — society?"

He laughed with some embarrassment. "I don't get much of it," he said simply.

"Don't you? What a pity! — isn't it, Bruno? I like society dreadfully, — dances, theatres, parties, — all sorts of things. Or I did — once."

She paused and stared at Helbeck. He did not speak, however. She sat up very straight and pushed the dog from her. "By the way," she said, in a shrill voice, "there are my cousins, the Masons. How far are they?"

"About seven miles."

"Quite up in the mountains, isn't it?"

Helbeck assented.

"Oh! I shall go there at once, I shall go to-

morrow," said the girl, with emphasis, resting her small chin lightly on the head of the dog, while she fixed her eyes — her hostile eyes — upon her host.

Helbeck made no answer. He went to fetch another log for the fire.

"Why doesn't he say something about them?" she thought angrily. "Why doesn't he say something about papa? — about his illness? — ask me any questions? He may have hated him, but it would be only decent. He is a very grand, imposing person, I suppose, with his melancholy airs, and his family. Papa was worth a hundred of him! Oh! past a quarter to ten? Time to go, and let him have his prayers to himself. Augustina told me ten."

She sprang up, and stiffly held out her hand.

"Good-night, Mr. Helbeck. I ought to go to Augustina and settle her for the night. To-morrow I should like to tell you what the doctor said about her; she is not strong at all. What time do you breakfast?"

"Half-past eight. But, of course ——"

"Oh, no! of course Augustina won't come down! I will carry her up her tray myself. Good-night."

Helbeck touched her hand. But as she turned away, he followed her a few steps irresolutely, and

then said: "Miss Fountain," — she looked round in surprise, — "I should like you to understand that everything that can be done in this poor house for my sister's comfort, and yours, I should wish done. My resources are not great, but my will is good."

He raised his eyelids, and she saw the eyes beneath, full, for the first time, — eyes grey like her own, but far darker and profounder. She felt a momentary flutter, perhaps of compunction. Then she thanked him and went her way.

When she had made her stepmother comfortable for the night, Laura Fountain went back to her room, shielding her candle with difficulty from the gusts that seemed to tear along the dark passages of the old house. The March rawness made her shiver, and she looked shrinkingly into the gloom before her, as she paused outside her own door. There, at the end of the passage, lay the old tower; so Mrs. Denton had told her. The thought of all the locked and empty rooms in it, — dark, cold spaces, — haunted perhaps by strange sounds and presences of the past, seemed to let loose upon her all at once a little whirlwind of fear. She hurried into her room, and was just setting down her candle before turning to lock her door, when a sound from the distant hall caught her ear.

A deep monotonous sound, rising and falling at regular intervals, Mr. Helbeck reading prayers, with the two maids, who represented the only service of the house.

Laura lingered with her hand on the door. In the silence of the ancient house, there was something touching in the sound, a kind of appeal. But it was an appeal which, in the girl's mind, passed instantly into reaction. She locked the door, and turned away, breathing fast as though under some excitement.

The tears, long held down, were rising, and the room, where a large wood fire was burning, — wood was the only provision of which there was a plenty at Bannisdale, — seemed to her suddenly stifling. She went to the casement window and threw it open. A rush of mild wind came through, and with it, the roar of the swollen river.

The girl leant forward, bathing her hot face in the wild air. There was a dark mist of trees below her, trees tossed by the wind; then, far down, a ray of moonlight on water; beyond, a fell-side, clear a moment beneath a sky of sweeping cloud; and last of all, highest of all, amid the clouds, a dim radiance, intermittent and yet steady, like the radiance of moonlit snow.

A strange nobility and freedom breathed from the

wide scene; from its mere depth below her; from the spacious curve of the river, the mountains half shown, half hidden, the great race of the clouds, the fresh beating of the wind. The north spoke to her, and the mountains. It was like the rush of something passionate and straining through her girlish sense, intensifying all that was already there. What was this thirst, this yearning, this physical anguish of pity that crept back upon her in all the pauses of the day and night?

It was nine months since she had lost her father, but all the scenes of his last days were still so clear to her that it seemed to her often sheer incredibility that the room, the bed, the helpless form, the noise of the breathing, the clink of the medicine glasses, the tread of the doctor, the gasping words of the patient, were all alike fragments and phantoms of the past, — that the house was empty, the bed sold, the patient gone. Oh! the clinging of the thin hand round her own, the piteousness of suffering — of failure! Poor, poor papa! — he would not say, even to comfort her, that they would meet again. He had not believed it, and so she must not.

No, and she would not! She raised her head fiercely and dried her tears. Only, why was she here, in the house of a man who had never spoken to her father — his brother-in-law — for thirteen years;

who had made his sister feel that her marriage had been a disgrace; who was all the time, no doubt, cherishing such thoughts in that black, proud head of his, while she, her father's daughter, was sitting opposite to him?

"How am I ever going to bear it—all these months?" she asked herself.

CHAPTER II

But the causes which had brought Laura Fountain to Bannisdale were very simple. It had all come about in the most natural inevitable way.

When Laura was eight years old — nearly thirteen years before this date — her father, then a widower with one child, had fallen in with and married Alan Helbeck's sister. At the time of their first meeting with the little Catholic spinster, Stephen Fountain and his child were spending part of the Cambridge vacation at a village on the Cumberland coast where a fine air could be combined with cheap lodgings. Fountain himself was from the North Country. His grandfather had been a small Lancashire yeoman, and Stephen Fountain had an inbred liking for the fells, the farmhouses, and even the rain of his native district. Before descending to the sea, he and his child had spent a couple of days with his cousin by marriage, James Mason, in the lonely stone house among the hills, which had belonged to the family since the Revolution. He left it gladly, however, for the farm life seemed to him much harder and

more squalid than he had remembered it to be, and he disliked James Mason's wife. As he and Laura walked down the long, rough track connecting the farm with the main road on the day of their departure, Stephen Fountain whistled so loud and merrily that the skipping child beside him looked at him with astonishment.

It was his way no doubt of thanking Providence for the happy chance that had sent his father to a small local government post at Newcastle, and himself to a grammar school with openings on the University. Yet as a rule he thought himself anything but a successful man. He held a lectureship at Cambridge in an obscure scientific subject, and was in his way both learned and diligent. But he had few pupils, and had never cared to have them. They interfered with his own research, and he had the passionate scorn for popularity which grows up naturally in those who have no power with the crowd. His religious opinions, or rather the manner in which he chose to express them, divided him from many good men. He was poor, and he hated his poverty. A rather imprudent marriage had turned out neither particularly well nor particularly ill. His wife had some beauty, however, and there was hardly time for disillusion. She died when Laura was still a tottering baby, and Stephen had missed her sorely for a

while. Since her death he had grown to be a very lonely man, silently discontented with himself and sourly critical of his neighbours. Yet all the same he thanked God that he was not his cousin James.

Potter's Beach as a watering-place was neither beautiful nor amusing. Laura was happy there, but that said nothing. All her childhood through, she had the most surprising gift for happiness. From morning till night she lived in a flutter of delicious nothings. Unless he watched her closely, Stephen Fountain could not tell for the life of him what she was about all day. But he saw that she was endlessly about something; her little hands and legs never rested; she dug, bathed, dabbled, raced, kissed, ate, slept, in one happy bustle, which never slackened except for the hours when she lay rosy and still in her bed. And even then the pretty mouth was still eagerly open, as though sleep had just breathed upon its chatter for a few charmed moments, and "the joy within" was already breaking from the spell.

Stephen Fountain adored her, but his affections were never enough for him. In spite of the child's spirits he himself found Potter's Beach a desolation, all the more that he was cut off from his books for a time by doctor's orders and his own common sense. Suddenly, as he took his daily walk over the sands with Laura, he began to notice a thin lady in

black, sitting alone under a bank of sea-thistles, and generally struggling with an umbrella which she had put up to shelter herself and her book from a prevailing and boisterous wind. Sometimes when he passed her in the little street, he caught a glimpse of timid eyes, or he saw and pitied the slight involuntary jerk of the head and shoulders, which seemed to tell of nervous delicacy. Presently they made friends, and he found her lonely and discontented like himself. She was a Catholic, he discovered; but her Catholicism was not that of the convert, but of an old inherited sort which sat easily enough on a light nature. Then, to his astonishment, it appeared that she lived with a brother at an old house in North Lancashire — a well-known and even, in its degree, famous house — which lay not seven miles distant from his grandfather's little property, and had been quite familiar to him by repute, and even by sight as a child. When he was a small lad staying at Browhead Farm, he had once or twice found his way to the Greet, and had strayed along its course through Bannisdale Park. Once even, when he was in the act of fishing a particular pool where the trout were rising in a manner to tempt a very archangel, he had been seized and his primitive rod broken over his shoulder by an old man whom he believed to have been the owner, Mr. Helbeck himself, — a magnificent white-haired person, about whom tales ran freely in the country-side.

So this little, shabby old maid was a Helbeck of Bannisdale! As he looked at her, Fountain could not help thinking with a hidden amusement of all the awesome prestige the name had once carried with it for his boyish ear. Thirty years back, what a gulf had seemed to yawn between the yeoman's grandson and the lofty owners of that stern and ancient house upon the Greet! And now, how glad was old Helbeck's daughter to sit or walk with him and his child! — and how plain it grew, as the weeks passed on, that if he, Stephen Fountain, willed it, she would make no difficulty at all about a much longer companionship! Fountain held himself to be the most convinced of democrats, a man who had a reasoned right to his Radical opinions that commoner folk must do without. Nevertheless, his pride fed on this small turn of fortune, and when he carelessly addressed his new friend, her name gave him pleasure.

It seemed that she possessed but little else, poor lady. Even in his young days, Fountain could remember that the Helbecks were reported to be straitened, to have already much difficulty in keeping up the house and the estate. But clearly things had fallen by now to a much lower depth. Miss Helbeck's dress, talk, lodgings, all spoke of poverty, great poverty. He himself had never known what

it was to have a superfluous ten pounds; but the feverish strain that belongs to such a situation as the Helbecks' awoke in him a new and sharp pity. He was very sorry for the little, harassed creature; that physical privation should touch a woman had always seemed to him a monstrosity.

What was the brother about? — a great strong fellow by all accounts, capable, surely, of doing something for the family fortunes. Instinctively Fountain held him responsible for the sister's fatigue and delicacy. They had just lost their mother, and Augustina had come to Potter's Beach to recover from long months of nursing. And presently Fountain discovered that what stood between her and health was not so much the past as the future.

"You don't like the idea of going home," he said to her once, abruptly, after they had grown intimate. She flushed, and hesitated; then her eyes filled with tears.

Gradually he made her explain herself. The brother, it appeared, was twelve years younger than herself, and had been brought up first at Stonyhurst, and afterwards at Louvain, in constant separation from the rest of the family. He had never had much in common with his home, since, at Stonyhurst, he had come under the influence of a Jesuit teacher, who, in the language of old Helbeck, had

turned him into "a fond sort of fellow," swarming with notions that could only serve to carry the family decadence a step further.

"We have been Catholics for twenty generations," said Augustina, in her quavering voice. "But our ways — father's ways — weren't good enough for Alan. We thought he was making up his mind to be a Jesuit, and father was mad about it, because of the old place. Then father died, and Alan came home. He and my mother got on best; oh! he was very good to her. But he and I weren't brought up in the same way; you'd think he was already under a rule. I don't — know — I suppose it's too high for me —— "

She took up a handful of sand, and threw it, angrily, from her thin fingers, hurrying on, however, as if the unburdenment, once begun, must have its course.

"And it's hard to be always pulled up and set right by some one you've nursed in his cradle. Oh! I don't mean he says anything; he and I never had words in our lives. But it's the way he has of doing things — the changes he makes. You feel how he disapproves of you; he doesn't like my friends — our old friends; the house is like a desert since he came. And the money he gives away! The priests just suck us dry — and he hasn't got it

to give. Oh! I know it's all very wicked of me; but when I think of going back to him — just us two, you know, in that old house — and all the trouble about money ——"

Her voice failed her.

"Well, don't go back," said Fountain, laying his hand on her arm.

And twenty-four hours later he was still pleased with himself and her. No doubt she was stupid, poor Augustina, and more ignorant than he had supposed a human being could be. Her only education seemed to have been supplied by two years at the "Couvent des Dames Anglaises" at St.-Omer, and all that she had retained from it was a small stock of French idioms, most of which she had forgotten how to use, though she did use them frequently, with a certain timid pretension. Of that habit Fountain, the fastidious, thought that he should break her. But for the rest, her religion, her poverty, — well, she had a hundred a year, so that he and Laura would be no worse off for taking her in, and the child's prospects, of course, should not suffer by a halfpenny. And as to the Catholicism, Fountain smiled to himself. No doubt there was some inherited feeling. But even if she did keep up her little mummeries, he could not see that they would do him or Laura any harm. And

for the rest she suited him. She somehow crept into his loneliness and fitted it. He was getting too old to go farther, and he might well fare worse. In spite of her love of talk, she was not a bad listener; and longer experience showed her to be in truth the soft and gentle nature that she seemed. She had a curious kind of vanity which showed itself in her feeling towards her brother. But Fountain did not find it disagreeable; it even gave him pleasure to flatter it; as one feeds or caresses some straying half-starved creature, partly for pity, partly that the human will may feel its power.

"I wonder how much fuss that young man will make?" Fountain asked himself, when at last it became necessary to write to Bannisdale.

Augustina, however, was thirty-five, in full possession of her little moneys, and had no one to consult but herself. Fountain enjoyed the writing of the letter, which was brief, if not curt.

Alan Helbeck appeared without an hour's delay at Potter's Beach. Fountain felt himself much inclined beforehand to treat the tall dark youth, sixteen years his junior, as a tutor treats an undergraduate. Oddly enough, however, when the two men stood face to face. Fountain was once more awkwardly conscious of that old sense of social distance which the sister had never recalled to him. The sting of it made him rougher

than he had meant to be. Otherwise the young man's very shabby coat, his superb good looks, and courteous reserve of manner might almost have disarmed the irritable scholar.

As it was, Helbeck soon discovered that Fountain had no intention of allowing Augustina to apply for any dispensation for the marriage, that he would make no promise of Catholic bringing-up, supposing there were children, and that his idea was to be married at a registry office.

"I am one of those people who don't trouble themselves about the affairs of another world," said Fountain in a suave voice, as he stood in the lodging-house window, a bearded, broad-shouldered person, his hands thrust wilfully into the very baggy pockets of his ill-fitting light suit. "I won't worry your sister, and I don't suppose there'll be any children. But if there are, I really can't promise to make Catholics of them. And as for myself, I don't take things so easy as it's the fashion to do now. I can't present myself in church, even for Augustina."

Helbeck sat silent for a few minutes with his eyes on the ground. Then he rose.

"You ask what no Catholic should grant," he said slowly. "But that of course you know. I can have nothing to do with such a marriage, and my duty naturally will be to dissuade my sister from it as strongly as possible."

Fountain bowed.

"She is expecting you," he said. "I of course await her decision."

His tone was hardly serious. Nevertheless, during the time that Helbeck and Augustina were pacing the sands together, Fountain went through a good deal of uneasiness. One never knew how or where this damned poison in the blood might break out again. That young fanatic, a Jesuit already by the look of him, would of course try all their inherited Mumbo Jumbo upon her; and what woman is at bottom anything more than the prey of the last speaker?

When, however, it was all over, and he was allowed to see his Augustina in the evening, he found her helpless with crying indeed, but as obstinate as only the meek of the earth can be. She had broken wholly with her brother and with Bannisdale; and Fountain gathered that, after all Helbeck's arguments and entreaties, there had flashed a moment of storm between them, when the fierce "Helbeck temper," traditional through many generations, had broken down the self-control of the ascetic, and Augustina must needs have trembled. However, there she was, frightened and miserable, but still determined. And her terror was much more concerned with the possi-

bility of any return to live with Alan and his all-exacting creed than anything else. Fountain caught himself wondering whether indeed she had imagination enough to lay much hold on those spiritual terrors with which she had no doubt been threatened. In this, however, he misjudged her, as will be seen.

Meanwhile he sent for an elderly Evangelical cousin of his wife's, who was accustomed to take a friendly interest in his child and himself. She, in Protestant jubilation over this brand snatched from the burning, came in haste, very nearly departing, indeed, in similar haste as soon as the unholy project of the secular marriage was mooted. However, under much persuasion she remained, lamenting; Augustina sent to Bannisdale for her few possessions, and the scanty ceremony was soon over.

Meanwhile Laura had but found in the whole affair one more amusement and excitement added to the many that, according to her, Potter's Beach already possessed. The dancing elfish child — who had no memory of her own mother — had begun by taking the little old maid under her patronising wing. She graciously allowed Augustina to make a lap for all the briny treasures she might accumulate in the course of a breathless morning; she

rushed to give her first information whenever that encroaching monster the sea broke down her castles. And as soon as it appeared that her papa liked Augustina, and had a use for her, Laura at the age of eight promptly accepted her as part of the family circle, without the smallest touch of either sentiment or opposition. She walked gaily hand in hand with her father to the registry office at St. Bees. The jealously hidden, stormy little heart knew well enough that it had nothing to fear.

Then came many quiet years at Cambridge. Augustina spoke no more of her brother, and apparently let her old creed slip. She conformed herself wholly to her husband's ways,—a little colourless thread on the stream of academic life, slightly regarded, and generally silent out of doors, but at home a gentle, foolish, and often voluble person, very easily made happy by some small kindness and a few creature comforts.

Laura meanwhile grew up, and no one exactly knew how. Her education was a thing of shreds and patches, managed by herself throughout, and expressing her own strong will or caprice from the beginning. She put herself to school — a day school only; and took herself away as soon as she was tired of it. She threw herself madly into physical exercises like dancing or skating; and excelled in most of them by

virtue of a certain wild grace, a tameless strength of spirits and will. And yet she grew up small and pale; and it was not till she was about eighteen that she suddenly blossomed into prettiness.

"Carrotina — why, what's happened to you?" said her father to her one day.

She turned in astonishment from her task of putting some books tidy on his study shelves. Then she coloured half angrily.

"I must put my hair up some time, I suppose," she said resentfully. There was something in the abruptness of her father's question, no less than in the new closeness and sharpness of eye with which he was examining her, that annoyed her.

"Well! you've made a young lady of yourself. I dare say I mustn't call you nicknames any more!"

"I don't mind," she said indifferently, going on with her work, while he looked at the golden-red mass she had coiled round her little head, with an odd half-welcome sense of change, a sudden prescience of the future.

Then she turned again.

"If — if you make any absurd changes," she said, with a frown, "I'll — I'll cut it all off!"

"You'd better not; there'd be ructions," he said, laughing. "It's not yours till you're twenty-one."

And to himself he said, "Gracious! I didn't bargain for a pretty daughter. What am I to do with her? Augustina 'll never get her married."

And certainly during this early youth, Laura showed no signs of getting herself married. She did not apparently know when a young man was by; and her bright vehement ways, her sharp turns of speech, went on just the same; she neither quivered nor thrilled; and her chatter, when she did chatter, spent itself almost with indifference on anyone who came near her. She was generally gay, generally in spirits; and her girl companions knew well that there was no one so reserved, and that the inmost self of her, if such a thing existed, dwelt far away from any ken of theirs. Every now and then she would have vehement angers and outbreaks which contrasted with the nonchalance of her ordinary temper; but it was hard to find the clue to them.

Altogether she passed for a clever girl, even in a University town, where cleverness is weighed. But her education, except in two points, was, in truth, of the slightest. Any mechanical drudgery that her father could set her, she did without a murmur; or, rather, she claimed it jealously, with a silent passion. But, with an obstinacy equally silent, she set herself against the drudgery that would have made her his intellectual companion.

His rows of technical books, the scholarly and laborious details of his work, filled her with an invincible repugnance. And he did not attempt to persuade her. As to women and their claims, he was old-fashioned and contemptuous; he would have been much embarrassed by a learned daughter. That she should copy and tidy for him; that she should sit curled up for hours with a book or a piece of work in a corner of his room; that she should bring him his pipe, and break in upon his work at the right moment with her peremptory "Papa, come out!"—these things were delightful, nay, necessary to him. But he had no dreams beyond; and he never thought of her, her education or her character, as a whole. It was not his way. Besides, girls took their chance. With a boy, of course, one plans and looks ahead. But Laura would have 200*l.* a year from her mother whatever happened, and something more at his own death. Why trouble oneself?

No doubt indirectly he contributed very largely to her growing up. The sight of his work and his methods; the occasional talks she overheard between him and his scientific comrades; the tones of irony and denial in the atmosphere about him; his antagonisms, his bitternesses, worked strongly upon her still plastic nature. Moreover she felt to her heart's core that he was unsuccessful; there were

appointments he should have had, but had failed to get, and it was the religious party, the "clerical crew" in Congregation or the Senate, that had stood in the way. From her childhood it came natural to her to hate bigoted people who believed in ridiculous things. It was they stood between her father and his deserts. There loomed up, as it were, on her horizon, something dim and majestic, which was called Science. Towards this her father pressed, she clinging to him; while all about them was a black and hindering crowd, through which they clove their way — contemptuously.

In one direction, indeed, Fountain admitted her to his mind. Like Mill, he found the rest and balm of life in poetry; and here he took Laura with him. They read to each other, they spurred each other to learn by heart. He kept nothing from her. Shelley was a passion of his own; it became hers. She taught herself German, that she might read Heine and Goethe with him; and one evening, when she was little more than sixteen, he rushed her through the first part of "Faust," so that she lay awake the whole night afterwards in such a passion of emotion, that it seemed, for the moment, to change her whole existence. Sometimes it astonished him to see what capacity she had, not only for the feeling, but for the sensuous pleasure, of poetry. Lines — sounds —

haunted her for days, the beauty of them would make her start and tremble.

She did her best, however, to hide this side of her nature even from him. And it was not difficult. She remained childishly immature and backward in many things. She was a personality; that was clear; one could hardly say that she was or had a character. She was a bundle of loves and hates; a force, not an organism; and her father was often as much puzzled by her as anyone else.

Music perhaps was the only study which ever conquered her indolence. Here it happened that a famous musician, who settled in Cambridge for a time, came across her gift and took notice of it. And to please him she worked with industry, even with doggedness. Brahms, Chopin, Wagner — these great romantics possessed her in music as Shelley or Rossetti did in poetry. "You little demon, Laura! How do you come to play like that?" a girl friend — her only intimate friend — said to her once in despair. "It's the expression. Where do you get it? And I practise, and you don't; it's not fair."

"Expression!" said Laura, with annoyance, "what does that matter? That's the amateur all over. Of course I play like that because I can't do it any better. If I could *play the notes*" — she clenched her little hand, with a curious, almost a

fierce energy — "if I had any technique — or was ever likely to have any, what should I want with expression? Any cat can give you expression! There was one under my window last night — you should just have heard it!"

Molly Friedland, the girl friend, shrugged her shoulders. She was as soft, as normal, as self-controlled, as Laura was wilful and irritable. But there was a very real affection between them.

Years passed. Insensibly Augustina's health began to fail; and with it the new cheerfulness of her middle life. Then Fountain himself fell suddenly and dangerously ill. All the peaceful habits and small pleasures of their common existence broke down after a few days, as it were, into a miserable confusion. Augustina stood bewildered. Then a convulsion of soul she had expected as little as anyone else, swept upon her. A number of obscure, inherited, half-dead instincts revived. She lived in terror; she slept, weeping; and at the back of an old drawer she found a rosary of her childhood to which her fingers clung night and day.

Meanwhile Fountain resigned himself to death. During his last days his dimmed senses did not perceive what was happening to his wife. But he troubled himself about her a good deal.

"Take care of her, Laura," he said once, "till

she gets strong. Look after her. — But you can't sacrifice your life. — It may be Christian," he added, in a murmur, "but it isn't sense."

Unconsciousness came on. Augustina seemed to lose her wits; and at last only Laura, sitting pale and fierce beside her father, prevented her stepmother from bringing a priest to his death-bed. "You would not *dare!*" said the girl, in her low, quivering voice; and Augustina could only wring her hands.

The day after her husband died Mrs. Fountain returned to her Catholic duties. When she came back from confession, she slipped as noiselessly as she could into the darkened house. A door opened upstairs, and Laura came out of her father's room.

"You have done it?" she said, as her stepmother, trembling with agitation and weariness, came towards her. "You have gone back to them?"

"Oh, Laura! I had to follow the call — my conscience — Laura! oh! your poor father!"

And with a burst of weeping the widow held out her hands.

Laura did not move, and the hands dropped.

"My father wants nothing," she said.

The indescribable pride and passion of her accent cowed Augustina, and she moved away, crying silently. The girl went back to the dead, and sat beside him,

in an anguish that had no more tears, till he was taken from her.

Mr. Helbeck wrote kindly to his sister in reply to a letter from her informing him of her husband's death, and of her own reconciliation with the Church. He asked whether he should come at once to help them through the business of the funeral, and the winding up of their Cambridge life. "Beg him, please, to stay away," said Laura, when the letter was shown her. "There are plenty of people here."

And indeed Cambridge, which had taken little notice of the Fountains during Stephen's lifetime, was even fussily kind after his death to his widow and child. It was at all times difficult to be kind to Laura in distress, but there was much true pity felt for her, and a good deal of curiosity as to her relations with her Catholic stepmother. Only from the Friedlands, however, would she accept, or allow her stepmother to accept, any real help. Dr. Friedland was a man of middle age, who had retired on moderate wealth to devote himself to historical work by the help of the Cambridge libraries. He had been much drawn to Stephen Fountain, and Fountain to him. It was a recent and a brief friendship, but there had been something in it on Dr. Friedland's side — something respectful and cordial, something

generous and understanding, for which Laura loved the infirm and grey-haired scholar, and would always love him. She shed some stormy tears after parting with the Friedlands, otherwise she left Cambridge with joy.

On the day before they left Cambridge Augustina received a parcel of books from her brother. For the most part they were kept hidden from Laura. But in the evening, when the girl was doing some packing in her stepmother's room, she came across a little volume lying open on its face. She lifted it, saw that it was called "Outlines of Catholic Belief," and that one page was still wet with tears. An angry curiosity made her look at what stood there: "A believer in one God who, without wilful fault on his part, knows nothing of the Divine Mystery of the Trinity, is held capable of salvation by many Catholic theologians. And there is the 'invincible ignorance' of the heathen. What else is possible to the Divine mercy let none of us presume to know. Our part in these matters is obedience, not speculation."

In faint pencil on the margin was written: "My Stephen *could* not believe. Mary — pray ——"

The book contained the Bannisdale book-plate, and the name "Alan Helbeck." Laura threw it down. But her face trembled through its scorn,

and she finished what she was doing in a kind of blind passion. It was as though she held her father's dying form in her arms, protecting him against the same meddling and tyrannical force that had injured him while he lived, and was still making mouths at him now that he was dead.

She and Augustina went to the sea—to Folkestone, for Augustina's health. Here Mrs. Fountain began to correspond regularly with her brother, and it was soon clear that her heart was hungering for him, and for her old home at Bannisdale. But she was still painfully dependent on Laura. Laura was her maid and nurse; Laura managed all her business. At last one day she made her prayer. Would Laura go with her—for a little while—to Bannisdale? Alan wished it—Alan had invited them both. "He would be so good to you, Laura—and I'm sure it would set me up."

Laura gave a gulp. She dropped her little chin on her hands and thought. Well—why not? It would be all hateful to her—Mr. Helbeck and his house together. She knew very well, or guessed what his relation to her father had been. But what if it made Augustina strong, if in time she could be left with her brother altogether, to live with him?—In one or two of his letters he had proposed as much. Why, that would bring Laura's

responsibility, her sole responsibility, at any rate, to an end.

She thought of Molly Friedland — of their girlish plans — of travel, of music.

"All right," she said, springing up. "We will go, Augustina. I suppose, for a little while, Mr. Helbeck and I can keep the peace. You must tell him to let me alone."

She paused, then said with sudden vehemence, like one who takes her stand — "And tell him, please, Augustina — make it very plain — that I shall never come in to prayers."

CHAPTER III

The sun was shining into Laura's room when she awoke. She lay still for a little while, looking about her.

Her room — which formed part of an eighteenth-century addition to the Tudor house — was rudely panelled with stained deal, save on the fireplace wall, where, on either side of the hearth, the plaster had been covered with tapestry. The subject of the tapestry was Diana hunting. Diana, white and tall, with her bow and quiver, came, queenly, through a green forest. Two greyhounds ranged beside her, and in the dim distance of the wood her maidens followed. On the right an old castle, with pillars like a Greek temple, rose stately but a little crooked on the edge of a blue sea; the sea much faded, with the wooden handle of a cupboard thrust rudely through it. Two long-limbed ladies, with pulled patched faces, stood on the castle steps. In front was a ship, with a waiting warrior and a swelling sail; and under him, a blue wave worn very threadbare, shamed indeed by that

intruding handle, but still blue enough, still windy enough for thoughts of love and flight.

Laura, half asleep still, with her hands under her cheek, lay staring in a vague pleasure at the castle and the forest. "Enchanted casements" — "perilous seas" — "in fairy lands forlorn." The lines ran sleepily, a little jumbled, in her memory.

But gradually the morning and the freshness worked; and her spirits, emerging from their half-dream, began to dance within her. When she sprang up to throw the window wide, there below her was the sparkling river, the daffodils waving their pale heads in the delicate Westmoreland grass, the high white clouds still racing before the wind. How heavenly to find oneself in this wild clean country! — after all the ugly squalors of parade and lodging-house, after the dingy bow-windowed streets with the March dust whirling through them.

She leant across the broad window-sill, her chin on her hands, absorbed, drinking it in. The eastern sun, coming slanting-ways, bathed her tumbled masses of fair hair, her little white form, her bare feet raised tiptoe.

Suddenly she drew back. She had seen the figure of a man crossing the park on the further side of the river, and the maidenly instinct drove her from the window; though the man in question was perhaps a

quarter of a mile away, and had he been looking for her, could not possibly have made out more than a pale speck on the old wall.

"Mr. Helbeck," — she thought — "by the height of him. Where is he off to before seven o'clock in the morning? I hate a man that can't keep rational hours like other people! Fricka, come here!"

For her little dog, who had sprung from the bed after its mistress, was now stretching and blinking behind her. At Laura's voice it jumped up and tried to lick her face. Laura caught it in her arms and sat down on the bed, still hugging it.

"No, Fricka, I don't like him — I don't, I don't, I *don't!* But you and I have just got to behave. If you annoy that big dog downstairs, he'll break your neck, — he will, Fricka. As for me," — she shrugged her small shoulders, — "well, Mr. Helbeck can't break *my* neck, so I'm dreadfully afraid I shall annoy him — dreadfully, dreadfully afraid! But I'll try not. You see, what we've got to do, is just to get Augustina well — stand over her with a broomstick and pour the tonics down her throat. Then, Fricka, we'll go our way and have some fun. Now look at us! ——"

She moved a little, so that the cracked glass on the dressing-table reflected her head and shoulders, with the dog against her neck.

"You know we're not at all bad-looking, Fricka —

neither of us. I've seen much worse. (Oh, Fricka! I've told you scores of times I can wash my face — without you — thank you!) There's all sorts of nice things that might happen if we just put ourselves in the way of them. Oh! I do want some fun — I do! — at least sometimes!"

But again the voice dropped suddenly; the big greenish eyes filled in a moment with inconsistent tears, and Laura sat staring at the sunshine, while the drops fell on her white nightgown.

Meanwhile Fricka, being half throttled, made a violent effort and escaped. Laura too sprang up, wiped away her tears as though she were furious with them, and began to look about her for the means of dressing. Everything in the room was of the poorest and scantiest — the cottage washstand with its crockery, the bare dressing-table and dilapidated glass.

"A bath! — my kingdom for a bath! I don't mind starving, but one must wash. Let's ring for that rough-haired girl, Fricka, and try and get round her. Goodness! — no bells?"

After long search, however, she discovered a tattered shred of tapestry hanging in a corner, and pulled it vigorously. Many efforts, however, were needed before there was a sound of feet in the passage outside. Laura hastily donned a blue dressing-gown, and stood expectant.

The door was opened unceremoniously and a girl thrust in her head. Laura had made acquaintance with her the night before. She was the housekeeper's underling and niece.

"Mrs. Denton says I'm not to stop. She's noa time for answerin bells. And you'll have some hot water when t' kettle boils."

The door was just shutting again when Laura sprang at the speaker and caught her by the arm.

"My dear," she said, dragging the girl in, "that won't do at all. Now look here"—she held up her little white hand, shaking the forefinger with energy—"I don't—want—to give—any trouble, and Mrs. Denton may keep her hot water. But I must have a bath—and a big can—and somebody must show me where to go for water—and then—*then*, my dear—if you make yourself agreeable, I'll—well, I'll teach you how to do your hair on Sundays—in a way that will surprise you!"

The girl stared at her in sudden astonishment, her dark stupid eyes wavering. She had a round, peasant face, not without comeliness, and a lustreless shock of black hair. Laura laughed.

"I will," she said, nodding; "you'll see. And I'll give you notions for your best frock. I'll be a regular elder sister to you—if you'll just do a few things for me—and Mrs. Fountain. What's your name—

Ellen? — that's all right. Now, is there a bath in the house?"

The girl unwillingly replied that there was one in the big room at the end of the passage.

"Show it me," said Laura, and marched her off there. The rough-headed one led the way along the panelled passage and opened a door.

Then it was Laura's turn to stare.

Inside she saw a vast room with finely panelled walls and a decorated ceiling. The sunlight poured in through an uncurtained window upon the only two objects in the room, — a magnificent bed, carved and gilt, with hangings of tarnished brocade, — and a round tin bath of a common, old-fashioned make, propped up against the wall. The oak boards were absolutely bare. The bed and the bath looked at each other.

"What's become of all the furniture?" said Laura, gazing round her in astonishment.

"The gentleman from Edinburgh had it all, lasst month," said the girl, still sullenly. "He's affther the bed now."

"Oh! — Does he often come here?"

The girl hesitated.

"Well, he's had a lot o' things oot o' t' house, sen I came."

"Has he?" said Laura. "Now, then — lend a hand."

Between them they carried off the bath; and then Laura informed herself where water was to be had, and when breakfast would be ready.

"T' Squire's gone oot," said Ellen, still watching the newcomer from under a pair of very black and beetling brows; "and Mrs. Denton said she supposed yo'd be wantin a tray for Mrs. Fountain."

"Does the Squire take no breakfast?"

"Noa. He's away to Mass — ivery mornin, an' he gets his breakfast wi' Father Bowles."

The girl's look grew more hostile.

"Oh, does he?" said Laura in a tone of meditation. "Well, then, look here. Put another cup and another plate on Mrs. Fountain's tray, and I'll have mine with her. Shall I come down to the kitchen for it?"

"Noa," said the girl hastily. "Mrs. Denton doan't like foak i' t' kitchen."

At that moment a call in Mrs. Denton's angriest tones came pealing along the passage outside. Laura laughed and pushed the girl out of the room.

An hour later Miss Fountain was ministering to her stepmother in the most comfortable bedroom that the house afforded. The furniture, indeed, was a medley. It seemed to have been gathered out of many other rooms. But at any rate there was abundance of it; a pet much worn, but still useful, covered the floor;

and Ellen had lit the fire without being summoned to do it. Laura recognised that Mr. Helbeck must have given a certain number of precise orders on the subject of his sister.

Poor Mrs. Fountain, however, was not happy. She was sitting up in bed, wrapped in an unbecoming flannel jacket — Augustina had no taste in clothes — and looking with an odd repugnance at the very passable breakfast that Laura placed before her. Laura did not quite know what to make of her. In old days she had always regarded her stepmother as an easy-going, rather self-indulgent creature, who liked pleasant food and stuffed chairs, and could be best managed or propitiated through some attention to her taste in sofa-cushions or in tea-cakes.

No doubt, since Mrs. Fountain's reconciliation with the Church of her fathers, she had shown sometimes an anxious disposition to practise the usual austerities of good Catholics. But neither doctor nor director had been able to indulge her in this respect, owing to the feebleness of her health. And on the whole she had acquiesced readily enough.

But Laura found her now changed and restless.

"Oh! Laura, I can't eat all that!"

"You must," said Laura firmly. "Really, Augustina, you *must*."

"Alan's gone out," said Augustina, with a wistful

inconsequence, straining her eyes as though to look through the diamond panes of the window opposite, at the park and the persons walking in it.

"Yes. He seems to go to Whinthorpe every morning for Mass. Ellen says he breakfasts with the priest."

Augustina sighed and fidgeted. But when she was half-way through her meal, Laura standing over her, she suddenly laid a shaking hand on Laura's arm.

"Laura! — Alan's a saint! — he always was — long ago — when I was so blind and wicked. But now — oh! the things Mrs. Denton's been telling me!"

"Has she?" said Laura coolly. "Well, make up your mind, Augustina" — she shook her bright head — "that you can't be the same kind of saint that he is — anyway."

Mrs. Fountain withdrew her hand in quick offence.

"I should be glad if you could talk of these things without flippancy, Laura. When I think how incapable I have been all these years, of understanding my dear brother ——"

"No — you see you were living with papa," said Laura slowly.

She had left her stepmother's side, and was standing with her back to an old cabinet, resting her elbows upon it. Her brows were drawn together, and poor Mrs. Fountain, after a glance at her, looked still more miserable.

"Your poor papa!" she murmured with a gulp, and then, as though to propitiate Laura, she drew her breakfast back to her, and again tried to eat it. Small and slight as they both were, there was a very sharp contrast between her and her stepdaughter. Laura's features were all delicately clear, and nothing could have been more definite, more brilliant than the colour of the eyes and hair, or the whiteness — which was a beautiful and healthy whiteness — of her skin. Whereas everything about Mrs. Fountain was indeterminate; the features with their slight twist to the left; the complexion, once fair, and now reddened by years and ill-health; the hair, of a yellowish grey; the head and shoulders with their nervous infirmity. Only the eyes still possessed some purity of colour. Through all their timidity or wavering, they were still blue and sweet; perhaps they alone explained why a good many persons — including her stepdaughter — were fond of Augustina.

"What has Mrs. Denton been telling you about Mr. Helbeck?" Laura inquired, speaking with some abruptness, after a pause.

"You wouldn't have any sympathy, Laura," said Mrs. Fountain, in some agitation. "You see, you don't understand our Catholic principles. I wish you did! — oh! I wish you did! But you don't. And so perhaps I'd better not talk about it."

"It might interest me to know the facts," said Laura, in a little hard voice. "It seems to me that I'm likely to be Mr. Helbeck's guest for a good while."

"But you won't like it, Laura!" cried Mrs. Fountain — "and you'll misunderstand Alan. Your poor dear father always misunderstood him." (Laura made a restless movement.) "It is not because we think we can save our souls by such things — of course not! — that's the way you Protestants put it —— "

"I'm not a Protestant!" said Laura hotly. Mrs. Fountain took no notice.

"But it's what the Church calls 'mortification,'" she said, hurrying on. "It's keeping the body under — as St. Paul did. That's what makes saints — and it does make saints — whatever people say. Your poor father didn't agree, of course. But he didn't know! — oh! dear, dear Stephen! — he didn't know. And Alan isn't cross, and it doesn't spoil his health — it doesn't, really."

"What does he do?" asked Laura, trying for the point.

But poor Augustina, in her mixed flurry of feeling, could hardly explain.

"You see, Laura, there's a strict way of keeping Lent, and — well — just the common way — doing as

little as you can. It used to be all much stricter, of course."

"In the Dark Ages?" suggested Laura. Augustina took no notice.

"And what the books tell you now, is much stricter than what anybody does. — I'm sure I don't know why. But Alan takes it strictly — he wants to go back to quite the old ways. Oh! I wish I could explain it ——"

Mrs. Fountain stopped bewildered. She was sure she had heard once that in the early Church people took no food at all till the evening — not even a drink. But Alan was not going to do that?

Laura had taken Fricka on her knee, and was straightening the ribbon round the dog's neck.

"Does he eat *anything?*" she asked carelessly, looking up. "If it's *nothing* — that would be interesting."

"Laura! if you only would try and understand! — Of course Alan doesn't settle such a thing for himself — nobody does with us. That's only in the English Church."

Augustina straightened herself, with an unconscious arrogance. Laura looked at her, smiling.

"Who settles it, then?"

"Why, his director, of course. He must have leave. But they have given him leave. He has chosen a rule for himself" — Augustina gave a

visible gulp — "and he called Mrs. Denton to him before Lent, and told her about it. Of course he'll hide it as much as he can. Catholics must never be singular — never! But if we live in the house with him he can't hide it. And all Lent, he only eats meat on Sundays, and other days — he wrote down a list —— Well, it's like the saints — that's all! — I just cried over it!"

Mrs. Fountain shook with the emotion of saying such things to Laura, but her blue eyes flamed.

"What! fish and eggs? — that kind of thing?" said Laura. "As if there was any hardship in that!"

"Laura! how can you be so unkind? — I must just keep it all to myself. — I won't tell you anything!" cried Augustina in exasperation.

Laura walked away to the window, and stood looking out at the March buds on the sycamores shining above the river.

"Does he make the servants fast too?" she asked presently, turning her head over her shoulder.

"No, no," said her stepmother eagerly; "he's never hard to them — only to himself. The Church doesn't expect anything more than 'abstinence,' you understand — not real fasting — from people like them — people who work hard with their hands. But — I really believe — they do very much as he does. Mrs.

Denton seems to keep the house on nothing. Oh! and, Laura — I really can't be always having extra things!"

Mrs. Fountain pushed her breakfast away from her.

"Please remember — nobody settles anything for themselves — in your Church," said Laura. "You know what that doctor — that Catholic doctor — said to you at Folkestone."

Mrs. Fountain sighed.

"And as to Mrs. Denton, I see — that explains the manners. No improvement — till Lent's over?"

"Laura!"

But her stepdaughter, who was at the window again looking out, paid no heed, and presently Augustina said with timid softness:

"Won't you have your breakfast, Laura? You know it's here — on my tray."

Laura turned, and Augustina to her infinite relief saw not frowns, but a face all radiance.

"I've been watching the lambs in the field across the river. Such ridiculous enchanting things! — such jumps — and affectations. And the river's heavenly — and all the general *feel* of it! I really don't know, Augustina, how you ever came to leave this country when you'd once been born in it."

Mrs. Fountain pushed away her tray, shook her head sadly, and said nothing.

"What is it? — and who is it?" cried Laura, standing amazed before a picture in the drawing-room at Bannisdale.

In front of her, on the panelled wall, hung a dazzling portrait of a girl in white, a creature light as a flower under wind; eyes upraised and eager, as though to welcome a lover; fair hair bound turban-like with a white veil; the pretty hands playing with a book. It shone from the brown wall with a kind of natural sovereignty over all below it and around it, so brilliant was the picture, so beautiful the woman.

Augustina looked up drearily. She was sitting shrunk together in a large chair, deep in some thoughts of her own.

"That's our picture — the famous picture," she explained slowly.

"Your Romney?" said Laura, vaguely recalling some earlier talk of her stepmother's.

Augustina nodded. She stared at the picture with a curious agitation, as though she were seeing its long familiar glories for the first time. Laura was much puzzled by her.

"Well, but it's magnificent!" cried the girl. "One needn't know much to know that. How can Mr. Helbeck call himself poor while he possesses such a thing?"

Augustina started.

"It's worth thousands," she said hastily. "We know that. There was a man from London came once, years ago. But papa turned him out — he would never sell his things. And she was our great-grandmother."

An idea flashed through Laura's mind.

"You don't mean to say that Mr. Helbeck is going to sell her?" said Laura impetuously. "It would be a shame!"

"Alan can do what he likes with anything," said Augustina in a quick resentment. "And he wants money badly for one of his orphanages — some of it has to be rebuilt. Oh! those orphanages — how they must have weighed on him — poor Alan! — poor dear Alan! — all these years!"

Mrs. Fountain clasped her thin hands together, with a sigh.

"Is it they that have eaten up the house bit by bit? — poor house! — poor dear house!" repeated Laura.

She was staring with an angry championship at the picture. Its sweet confiding air — as of one cradled in love, happy for generations in the homage of her kindred and the shelter of the old house — stood for all the natural human things that creeds and bigots were always trampling under foot.

Mrs. Fountain, however, only shook her head.

"I don't think Alan's settled anything yet. Only Mrs. Denton's afraid. — There was somebody came to see it a few days ago ——"

"He certainly ought not to sell it," repeated Laura with emphasis. "He has to think of the people that come after. What will they care for orphanages? He only holds the picture in trust."

"There will be no one to come after," said Augustina slowly. "For of course he will never marry."

"Is he too great a saint for that too?" cried Laura. "Then all I can say, Augustina, is that — it — would — do him a great deal of good."

She beat her little foot on the ground impatiently, pointing the words.

"You don't know anything about him, Laura," said Mrs. Fountain, with an attempt at spirit. Then she added reproachfully: "And I'm sure he wants to be kind to you."

"He thinks me a little heretical toad, thank you!" said Laura, spinning round on the bare boards, and dropping a curtsey to the Romney. "But never mind, Augustina — we shall get on quite properly. Now, aren't there a great many more rooms to see?"

Augustina rose uncertainly. "There is the chapel, of course," she said, "and Alan's study ——"

"Oh! we needn't go there," said Laura hastily. "But show me the chapel."

Mr. Helbeck was still absent, and they had been exploring Bannisdale. It was a melancholy progress they had been making through a house that had once — when Augustina left it — stood full of the hoardings and the treasures of generations, and was now empty and despoiled.

It was evident that, for his sister's welcome, Mr. Helbeck had gathered into the drawing-room, as into her bedroom upstairs, the best of what still remained to him. Chairs and tables, and straight-lined sofas, some of one date, some of another, collected from the garrets and remote corners of the old house, and covered with the oddest variety of faded stuffs, had been stiffly set out by Mrs. Denton upon an old Turkey carpet, whereof the rents and patches had been concealed as much as possible. Here at least was something of a cosmos — something of order and of comfort.

The hall too, and the dining-room, in spite of their poor new furnishings, were still human and habitable. But most of the rooms on which Laura and Mrs. Fountain had been making raid were like that first one Laura had visited, mere homes of lumber and desolation. Blinds drawn; dust-motes dancing in the stray shafts of light that struck across the gloom of the old walls and floors. Here and there some lingering fragment of fine furniture; but as a

rule bareness, poverty, and void — nothing could be more piteous, or, to Mrs. Fountain's memory, more surprising. For some years before she left Bannisdale, her father had not known where to turn for a pound of ready money. Yet when she fled from it, the house and its treasures were still intact.

The explanation of course was very simple. Alan Helbeck had been living upon his house, as upon any other capital. Or rather he had been making alms of it. The house stood gashed and bare that Catholic orphans might be put to school — was that it? Laura hardly listened to Augustina's plaintive babble as they crossed the hall. It was all about Alan, of course — Alan's virtues, Alan's charities. As for the orphans, the girl hated the thought of them. Grasping little wretches! She could see them all in a sanctimonious row, their eyes cast up, and rosaries — like the one Augustina was always trying to hide from her — in their ugly little hands.

They turned down a long stone passage leading to the chapel. As they neared the chapel door there was a sound of voices from the hall at their back.

"It's Alan," said Augustina peering, "and Father Bowles!"

She hurried back to meet them, skirts and cap strings flying. Laura stood still.

But after a few words with his sister, Helbeck came up to his guest with outstretched hand.

"I hope we have not kept you waiting for dinner. May I introduce Father Bowles to you?"

Laura bowed with all the stiffness of which a young back is capable. She saw an old grey-haired priest, with a round face and a pair of chubby hands, which he constantly held crossed or clasped upon his breast. His long irregular mouth seemed to fold over at the corners above his very small and childish chin. The mouth and the light blue eyes wore an expression of rather mincing gentleness. His short figure, though bent a little with years, was still vigorous, and his gait quick and bustling.

He addressed Miss Fountain with a lisping and rather obsequious politeness, asking a great many unnecessary questions about her journey and her arrival.

Laura answered coldly. But when he passed to Mrs. Fountain, Augustina was all effusion.

"When I think what has been granted to us since I was here last!" she said to the priest as they moved on, — clasping her hands, and flushing.

"The dear Bishop took such trouble about it," he said in a little murmuring voice. "It was not easy — but the Church loves to content her children."

Involuntarily Laura glanced at Helbeck.

"My sister refers to the permission which has been granted to us to reserve the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel," he said gravely. "It is a privilege we never enjoyed till last year."

Laura made no reply.

"Shall I slip away?" she thought, looking round her.

But at that moment Mr. Helbeck lifted the heavy latch of the chapel door; and her young curiosity was too strong for her. She followed the others.

Mr. Helbeck held the door open for her.

"You will perhaps care to look at the frescoes," he said to her as she hurried past him. She nodded, and walked quickly away to the left, by herself. Then she turned and looked about her.

It was the first time that she had entered a Catholic church, and every detail was new to her. She watched the other three sign themselves with holy water and drop low on one knee before the altar. So that was the altar. She stared at it with a scornful repugnance; yet her pulse quickened as though what she saw excited her. What was that erection above it, with a veil of red silk drawn round it — and why was that lamp burning in front of it?

She recalled Mr. Helbeck's words — "permission to reserve the Blessed Sacrament." Then, in a flash, a hundred vague memories, the deposit of a hearsay

knowledge, enlightened her. She knew and remembered much less than any ordinary girl would have done. But still, in the main, she guessed at what was passing. That of course was the Sacrament, before which Mr. Helbeck and the others were kneeling! — for instinctively she felt that it was to no empty shrine the adoration of those silent figures was being offered.

Fragments from Augustina's talk at Folkestone came back to her. Once she had overheard some half-whispered conversation between her stepmother and a Catholic friend, from which she had vaguely understood that the "Blessed Sacrament" was kept in the Catholic churches, was always there, and that the faithful "visited" it — that these "visits" were indeed specially recommended as a means to holiness. And she recalled how, as they came home from their daily walk to the beach, Mrs. Fountain would disappear from her, through the shadowy door of a Catholic church that stood in the same street as their lodgings — how she would come home half an hour afterwards, shaken with fresh ardours, fresh remorse.

But how could such a thing be allowed, be possible, in a private chapel — in a room that was really part of a private house? God — the Christ of Calvary — in that gilt box, upon that altar!

The young girl's arms fell by her side in a sud-

den rigidity. A wave of the most passionate repulsion swept through her. What a gross, what an intolerable superstition! — how was she to live with it, beside it? The next instant it was as though her hand clasped her father's — clinging to him proudly, against this alien world. Why should she feel lonely? — the little heretic, left standing there alone in her distant corner. Let her rather rejoice that she was her father's daughter!

She drew herself up, and coolly looked about her. The worshippers had risen; long as the time had seemed to Laura, they had only been two or three minutes on their knees; and she could see that Augustina was talking eagerly to her brother, pointing now to the walls, now to the altar.

It seemed as though Augustina were no less astonished than her stepdaughter by the magnificence of the chapel. Was it all new, — the frescoes, the altar with its marble and its gold, the white figure of the Virgin, which gleamed above the small side-altar to the left? It had the air of newness and of costliness, an air which struck the eye all the more sharply because of the contrast between it and the penury, the starvation, of the great house that held the chapel in its breast.

But while Laura was still wondering at the general impression of rich beauty, at the Lenten purple

of the altar, at the candelabra, and the perfume, certain figures and colours on the wall close to her seized her, thrusting the rest aside. On either side of the altar, the walls to right and left, from the entrance up to the sanctuary, were covered with what appeared to be recent painting — painting, indeed, that was still in the act. On either hand, long rows of life-sized saints, men and women, turned their adoring faces towards the Christ looking down upon them from a crucifix above the tabernacle. On the north wall, about half the row was unfinished; faces, haloes, drapery, strongly outlined in red, still waited for the completing hand of the artist. The rest glowed and burned with colour — colour the most singular, the most daring. The carnations and rose colours, the golds and purples, the blues and lilacs and greens — in the whole concert of tone, in spite of its general simplicity of surface, there was something at once ravishing and troubling, something that spoke as it were from passion to passion.

Laura's nature felt the thrill of it at once, just as she had felt the thrill of the sunshine lighting up the tapestry of her room.

"Why isn't it crude and hideous?" she asked herself, in a marvel. "But it isn't. One never saw such blues — except in the sea — or such greens — and rose! And the angels between! — and the

flowers under their feet! — Heavens! how lovely! Who did it?"

"Do you admire the frescoes?" said a little voice behind her.

She turned hastily, and saw Father Bowles smiling upon her, his plump white hands clasped in front of him, as usual. It was an attitude which seemed to make the simplest words sound intimate and possessive. Laura shrank from it in quick annoyance.

"They are very strange, and — and startling," she said stiffly, moving as far away from the grey-haired priest as possible. "Who painted them?"

"Mr. Helbeck first designed them. But they were carried out for a time by a youth of great genius." Father Bowles dwelt softly upon the word "*ge*-nius," as though he loved it. "He was once a lad from these parts, but has now become a Jesuit. So the work was stopped."

"What a pity!" said Laura impetuously. "He ought to have been a painter."

The priest smiled, and made her an odd little bow. Then, without saying anything more about the artist, he chattered on about the frescoes and the chapel, as though he had beside him the most sympathetic of listeners. Nothing that he said was the least interesting or striking; and Laura, in a

passion of silent dislike, kept up a steady movement towards the door all the time.

In the passage outside Mrs. Fountain was lingering alone. And when Laura appeared she caught hold of her stepdaughter and detained her while the priest passed on. Laura looked at her in surprise, and Mrs. Fountain, in much agitation, whispered in the girl's ear:

"Oh, Laura — do remember, dear! — don't ask Alan about those pictures — those frescoes — by young Williams. I can tell you some time — and you might say something to hurt him — poor Alan!"

Laura drew herself away.

"Why should I say anything to hurt him? What's the mystery?"

"I can't tell you now" — Mrs. Fountain looked anxiously towards the hall. "People have been so hard on Alan — *so* unkind about it! It's been a regular persecution. And you wouldn't understand — wouldn't sympathise ——"

"I really don't care to know about it, Augustina! And I'm so hungry — famished! Look, there's Mr. Helbeck signing to us. Joy! — that's dinner."

Laura expected the midday meal with some curiosity. But she saw no signs of austerity. Mr. Helbeck pressed the roast chicken on Father Bowles,

took pains that he should enjoy a better bottle of wine than usual, and as to himself ate and drank very moderately indeed, but like anybody else. Laura could only imagine that it was not seemly to outdo your priest.

The meal of course was served in the simplest way, and all the waiting was done by Mr. Helbeck, who would allow nobody to help him in the task.

The conversation dragged. Laura and her host talked a little about the country and the weather. Father Bowles and Augustina tried to pick up the dropped threads of thirteen years; and Mrs. Fountain was alternately eager for Whinthorpe gossip, or reduced to an abrupt unhappy silence by some memory of the past.

Suddenly Father Bowles got up from his chair, ran across the room to the window with his napkin in his hand, and pounced eagerly upon a fly that was buzzing on the pane. Then he carefully opened the window, and flicked the dead thing off the sill.

"I beg your pardon," he said humbly to Mrs. Fountain as he returned to his seat. "It was a nasty fly. I can't abide 'em. I always think of Beelzebub, who was the prince of the flies."

Laura's mouth twitched with laughter. She promised herself to make a study of Father Bowles.

And, indeed, he was a character in his own small way. He was a priest of an old-fashioned type, with no pretensions to knowledge or to manners. Wherever he went he was a meek and accommodating guest, for his recollection went back to days when a priest coming to a private house to say Mass would as likely as not have his meals in the pantry. And he was naturally of a gentle and yielding temper — though rather sly.

But he had several tricks as curious as they were persistent. Not even the presence of his bishop could make him spare a bluebottle. And he had, on the other hand, a peculiar passion for the smell of wax. He would blow out a candle on the altar before the end of Mass that he might enjoy the smell of it. He disliked Jesuits, and religious generally, if the truth were known; excepting only the orphanage nuns, who knew his weaknesses and were kind to them. He had no love for modern innovations, or modern devotions; there was a hidden Gallican strain in him; and he firmly believed that in the old days before Catholic emancipation, and before the Oxford movement, the Church made more converts than she did now.

Towards the end of the lunch Laura inquired of Mr. Helbeck whether any conveyance was to be got in the village.

"I wish to go to Browhead Farm this afternoon," she said rather shortly.

"Certainly," said Helbeck. "Certainly. I will see that something is found for you."

But his voice had no cordiality, and Laura at once thought him ungracious.

"Oh, pray don't give yourself any trouble," she said, flushing, "I can walk to the village."

Helbeck paused.

"If you could wait till to-morrow," he said after a moment, "I could promise you the pony. Unfortunately he is busy this afternoon."

"Oh, do wait, Laura!" cried Augustina. "There is so much unpacking to do."

"Very well," said the girl unwillingly.

As she turned away from him Helbeck's look followed her. She was in a dress of black serge, which followed the delicate girlish frame with perfect simplicity, and was relieved at the neck and wrists with the plainest of white collars and cuffs. But there was something so brilliant in the hair, so fawnlike in the carriage of the head, that she seemed to Helbeck to be all elegance; had he been asked to describe her, he would have said she was in *grande toilette*. Little as he spoke to her, he found himself perpetually conscious of her. Her evident — childishly evident — dislike of her new surroundings half

amused, half embarrassed him. He did not know what topic to start with her; soon, perhaps, he might have a difficulty in keeping the peace! It was all very absurd.

After luncheon they gathered in the hall for a while, Father Bowles talking eagerly with Helbeck and Augustina about "orphans" and "new buildings." Laura stood apart awhile — then went for her hat.

When she reappeared, in walking dress — with Fricka at her heels — Helbeck opened the heavy outer door for her.

"May I have Bruno?" she said.

Helbeck turned and whistled.

"You are not afraid?" he said, smiling, and looking at Fricka.

"Oh, dear no! I spent an hour this morning introducing them."

At that moment Bruno came bounding up. He looked from his master to Laura in her hat, and seemed to hesitate. Then, as she descended the steps, he sprang after her. Laura began to run; the two dogs leapt about her; her light voice, checking or caressing, came back to Helbeck on the spring wind. He watched her and her companions so long as they were in sight — the golden hair among the trees, the dancing steps of the girl, the answering frolic of the dogs.

Then he turned back to his sister, his grave mouth twitching.

"How thankful she is to get rid of us!"

He laughed out. The priest laughed, too, more softly.

"It was the first time, I presume, that Miss Fountain had ever been within a Catholic church?" he said to Augustina.

Augustina flushed.

"Of course it is the first time. Oh! Alan, you can't think how strange it is to her."

She looked rather piteously at her brother.

"So I perceive," he said. "You told me something, but I had not realised ——"

"You see, Alan —" cried Augustina, watching her brother's face, — "it was with the greatest difficulty that her mother got Stephen to consent even to her being baptized. He opposed it for a long time."

Father Bowles murmured something under his breath.

Helbeck paused for a moment, then said:

"What was her mother like?"

"Everyone at Cambridge used to say she was 'a sweet woman' — but — but Stephen, — well, you know, Alan, Stephen always had his way! I always wonder she managed to persuade him about the baptism."

She coloured still more deeply as she spoke, and her

nervous infirmity became more pronounced. Alas! it was not only with the first wife that Stephen had had his way! Her own marriage had begun to seem to her a mere sinful connection. Poor soul — poor Augustina!

Her brother must have divined something of what was passing in her mind, for he looked down upon her with a peculiar gentleness.

"People are perhaps more ready to talk of that responsibility than to take it," he said kindly. "But, Augustina, —" his voice changed, — "how pretty she is! — You hardly prepared me ——"

Father Bowles modestly cast down his eyes. These were not questions that concerned him. But Helbeck went on, speaking with decision, and looking at his sister:

"I confess — her great attractiveness makes me a little anxious — about the connection with the Masons. Have you ever seen any of them, Augustina?"

No — Augustina had seen none of them. She believed Stephen had particularly disliked the mother, the widow of his cousin, who now owned the farm jointly with her son.

"Well, no," said Helbeck dryly, "I don't suppose he and she would have had much in common."

"Isn't she a dreadful Protestant — Alan?"

"Oh, she's just a specimen of the ordinary English

Bible-worship run mad," he said carelessly. "She is a strange woman, very well known about here. And there's a foolish parson living near them, up in the hills, who makes her worse. But it's the son I'm thinking of."

"Why, Alan — isn't he respectable?"

"Not particularly. He's a splendid athletic fellow — doing his best to make himself a blackguard, I'm afraid. I've come across him once or twice, as it happens. He's not a desirable cousin for Miss Fountain — that I can vouch for! And unluckily," he smiled, "Miss Fountain won't hear any good of this house at Browhead Farm."

Even Augustina drew herself up proudly.

"My dear Alan, what does it matter what that sort of people think?"

He shook his head.

"It's a queer business. They were mixed up with young Williams."

Augustina started.

"Mrs. Mason was a great friend of his mother, who died. They hate me like poison. However——"

The priest interposed.

"Mrs. Mason is a very violent, a most unseemly woman," he said, in his mincing voice. "And the father — the old man — who is now dead, was concerned in the rioting near the bridge——"

"When Alan was struck? Mrs. Denton told me! How *abominable!*"

Augustina raised her hands in mingled reprobation and distress.

Helbeck looked annoyed.

"That doesn't matter one brass farthing," he said, in some haste. "Father Bowles was much worse treated than I on that occasion. But you see the whole thing is unlucky — it makes it difficult to give Miss Fountain the hints one would like to give her."

He threw himself down beside his sister, talking to her in low tones. Father Bowles took up the local paper.

Presently Augustina broke out — with another wringing of the hands.

"Don't put it on me, my dear Alan! I tell you — Laura has always done exactly what she liked since she was a baby."

Mr. Helbeck rose. His face and air already expressed a certain haughtiness; and at his sister's words there was a very definite tightening of the shoulders.

"I do not intend to have Hubert Mason hanging about the house," he said quietly, as he thrust his hands into his pockets.

"Of course not! — but she wouldn't expect it," cried Augustina in dismay. "It's the keeping her

away from them, that's the difficulty. She thinks so much of her cousins, Alan. They're her father's only relations. I know she'll want to be with them half her time!"

"For love of them — or dislike of us? Oh! I dare say it will be all right," he added abruptly. "Father Bowles, shall I drive you half-way? The pony will be round directly."

CHAPTER IV

It was a Sunday morning — bright and windy. Miss Fountain was driving a shabby pony through the park of Bannisdale — driving with a haste and glee that sent the little cart spinning down the road.

Six hours — she calculated — till she need see Bannisdale again. Her cousins would ask her to dinner and to tea. Augustina and Mr. Helbeck might have all their Sunday antics to themselves. There were several priests coming to luncheon — and a function in the chapel that afternoon. Laura flicked the pony sharply as she thought of it. Seven miles between her and it? Joy!

Nevertheless, she did not get rid of the old house and its suggestions quite as easily as she wished. The park and the river had many windings. Again and again the grey gabled mass thrust itself upon her attention, recalling each time, against her will, the face of its owner.

A high brow — hollows in the temples, deep hollows in the cheeks — pale blue eyes — a short and pointed beard, greyish-black like the hair — the close

whiskers black, too, against the skin — a general impression of pallor, dark lines, strong shadows, melancholy force —

She burst out laughing.

A pose! — nothing in the world but a pose. There was a wretched picture of Charles I. in the dining-room — a daub "after" some famous thing, she supposed — all eyes and hair, long face, and lace collar. Mr. Helbeck was "made up" to that — she was sure of it. He had found out the likeness, and improved upon it. Oh! if one could only present him with the collar and blue ribbon complete!

"— Cut his head off, and have done with him!" she said aloud, whipping up the pony, and laughing at her own petulance.

Who could live in such a house — such an atmosphere?

As she drove along, her mind was all in a protesting whirl. On her return from her walk with the dogs the day before, she had found a service going on in the chapel, Father Bowles officiating, and some figures in black gowns and white-winged coifs assisting. She had fled to her own room, but when she came down again, the black-garbed "Sisters" were still there, and she had been introduced to them. Ugh! what manners! Must one always, if one was a Catholic, make that cloying, hypo-

critical impression? "Three of them kissed me," she reminded herself, in a quiver of wrath.

They were Sisters from the orphanage apparently, or one of the orphanages, and there had been endless talk of new buildings and money, while she, Laura, sat dumb in her corner looking at old photographs of the house. Helbeck, indeed, had not talked much. While the black women were chattering with Augustina and Father Bowles, he had stood, mostly silent, under the picture of his great-grandmother, only breaking through his reverie from time to time to ask or answer a question. Was he pondering the sale of the great-grandmother, or did he simply know that his silence and aloofness were picturesque, that they compelled other people's attention, and made him the centre of things more effectively than more ordinary manners could have done? In recalling him the girl had an impatient sense of something commanding; of something, moreover, that held herself under observation. "One thinks him shy at first, or awkward — nothing of the sort! He is as proud as Lucifer. Very soon one sees that he is just looking out for his own way in everything.

"And as for temper! ——"

After the Sisters departed, a young architect had appeared at supper. A point of difference had

arisen between him and Mr. Helbeck. He was to be employed, it appeared, in the enlargement of this blessed orphanage. Mr. Helbeck, no doubt, with a view to his pocket — to do him justice, there seemed to be no other pocket concerned than his — was of opinion that certain existing buildings could be made use of in the new scheme. The architect — a nervous young fellow, with awkward manners, and the ambitions of an artist — thought not, and held his own, insistently. The discussion grew vehement. Suddenly Helbeck lost his temper.

"Mr. Munsey! I must ask you to give more weight, if you please, to my wishes in this matter! They may be right or wrong — but it would save time, perhaps, if we assumed that they would prevail."

The note of anger in the voice made every one look up. The Squire stood erect a moment; crumpled in his hand a half-sheet of paper on which young Munsey had been making some calculations, and flung it into the fire. Augustina sat cowering. The young man himself turned white, bowed, and said nothing. While Father Bowles, of course, like the old tabby that he was, had at once begun to purr conciliation.

"Would I have stood meek and mum if I'd been the young man!" thought Laura. "Would I! Oh!

if I'd had the chance! And he should not have made up so easily, either."

For she remembered, also, how, after Father Bowles was gone, she had come in from the garden to find Mr. Helbeck and the architect pacing the long hall together, on what seemed to be the friendliest of terms. For nearly an hour, while she and Augustina sat reading over the fire, the colloquy went on.

Helbeck's tones then were of the gentlest; the young man too spoke low and eagerly, pressing his plans. And once when Laura looked up from her book, she had seen Helbeck's arm resting for a moment on the young fellow's shoulder. Oh! no doubt Mr. Helbeck could make himself agreeable when he chose — and struggling architects must put up with the tempers of their employers.

All the more did Miss Fountain like to think that the Squire could compel no court from her.

She recalled that when Mr. Munsey had said good-night, and they three were alone in the firelit hall, Helbeck had come to stand beside her. He had looked down upon her with an air which was either kindness or weariness; he had been willing — even, she thought, anxious to talk with her. But she did not mean to be first trampled on, then patronised, like the young man. So Mr. Helbeck had hardly begun — with that occasional timidity which

sat so oddly on his dark and strong physique — to speak to her of the two Sisters of Charity who had been his guests in the afternoon, when she abruptly discovered it was time to say good-night. She winced a little as she remembered the sudden stiffening of his look, the careless touch of his hand.

The day was keen and clear. A nipping wind blew beneath the bright sun, and the opening buds had a parched and hindered look. But to Laura the air was wine, and the country all delight. She was mounting the flank of a hill towards a straggling village. Straight along the face of the hill lay her road, past the villages and woods that clothed the hill slope, till someone should show her the gate beyond which lay the rough ascent to Browhead Farm.

Above her, now, to her right, rose a craggy fell with great screes plunging sheer down into the woods that sheltered the village; below, in the valley-plain, stretched the purples and greens of the moss; the rivers shone in the sun as they came speeding from the mountains to the sea; and in the far distance the heights of Lakeland made one pageant with the sun and the clouds — peak after peak thrown blue against the white, cloud after cloud breaking to show the dappled hills below, in such a glory of

silver and of purple, such a freshness of atmosphere and light, that mere looking soon became the most thrilling, the most palpable of joys. Laura's spirits began to sing and soar, with the larks and the blackcaps!

Then, when the village was gone, came a high stretch of road, looking down upon the moss and all its bounding fells, which ran out upon its purple face like capes upon a sea. And these nearer fields — what were these thick white specks upon the new-made furrows? Up rose the gulls for answer; and the girl felt the sea-breath from their dazzling wings, and turned behind her to look for that pale opening in the south-west through which the rivers passed.

And beyond the fields a wood — such a wood as made Laura's south-country eyes stand wide with wonder! Out she jumped, tied the pony's rein to a gate beside the road, and ran into the hazel brush-wood with little cries of pleasure. A Westmoreland wood in daffodil time — it was nothing more and nothing less. But to this child with the young passion in her blood, it was a dream, an ecstasy. The golden flowers, the slim stalks, rose from a mist of greenish-blue, made by their speary leaf amid the encircling browns and purples, the intricate stem and branch-work of the still winter-bound hazels. Never were daffodils in such a wealth before!

They were flung on the fell-side through a score of acres, in sheets and tapestries of gold, — such an audacious, unreckoned plenty as went strangely with the frugal air and temper of the northern country, with the bare walled fields, the ruggedness of the crags above, and the melancholy of the treeless marsh below. And within this common lavishness, all possible delicacy, all possible perfection of the separate bloom and tuft — each foot of ground had its own glory. For below the daffodils there was a carpet of dark violets, so dim and close that it was their scent first bewrayed them; and as Laura lay gathering with her face among the flowers, she could see behind their gold, and between the hazel stems, the light-filled greys and azures of the mountain distance. Each detail in the happy whole struck on the girl's eager sense and made there a poem of northern spring — spring as the fell-country sees it, pure, cold, expectant, with flashes of a blossoming beauty amid the rocks and pastures, unmatched for daintiness and joy.

Presently Laura found herself sitting — half crying! — on a mossy tuft, looking along the wood to the distance. What was it in this exquisite country that seized upon her so — that spoke to her in this intimate, this appealing voice?

Why, she was of it — she belonged to it — she felt

it in her veins! Old inherited things leapt within her — or it pleased her to think so. It was as though she stretched out her arms to the mountains and fields, crying to them, "I am not a stranger — draw me to you — my life sprang from yours!" A host of burning and tender thoughts ran through her. Their first effect was to remind her of the farm and of her cousins; and she sprang up, and went back to the cart.

On they rattled again, downhill through the wood, and up on the further side — still always on the edge of the moss. She loved the villages, and their medley of grey houses wedged among the rocks; she loved the stone farms with their wide porches, and the white splashes on their grey fronts; she loved the tufts of fern in the wall crannies, the limestone ribs and bonework of the land breaking everywhere through the pastures, the incomparable purples of the woods, and the first brave leafing of the larches and the sycamores. Never had she so given her heart to any new world; and through her delight flashed the sorest, tenderest thoughts of her father. "Oh! papa — oh, papa!" she said to herself again and again in a little moan. Every day perhaps he had walked this road as a child, and she could still see herself as a child, in a very dim vision, trotting beside him down the Browhead Road. She turned

at last into the fell-gate to which a passing boy directed her, with a long breath that was almost a sob.

She had given them no notice; but surely, surely they would be glad to see her!

They? She tried to split up the notion, to imagine the three people she was going to see. Cousin Elizabeth — the mother? Ah! she knew her, for they had never liked Cousin Elizabeth. She herself could dimly remember a hard face; an obstinate voice raised in discussion with her father. Yet it was Cousin Elizabeth who was the Fountain born, who had carried the little family property as her dowry to her husband James Mason. For the grandfather had been free to leave it as he chose, and on the death of his eldest son — who had settled at the farm after his marriage, and taken the heavy work of it off his father's shoulders — the old man had passionately preferred to leave it to the strong, capable granddaughter, who was already provided with a lover, who understood the land, moreover, and could earn and "addle" as he did, rather than to his bookish milksop of a second son, so richly provided for already, in his father's contemptuous opinion, by the small government post at Newcastle.

"Let us always thank God, Laura, that my grand-

father was a brute to yours!" Stephen Fountain would say to his girl on the rare occasions when he could be induced to speak of his family at all. "But for that I might be a hedger and ditcher to this day."

Well, but Cousin Elizabeth's children? Laura herself had some vague remembrance of them. As the pony climbed the steep lane she shut her eyes and tried hard to recall them. The fair-haired boy — rather fat and masterful — who had taken her to find the eggs of a truant hen in a hedge behind the house — and had pushed her into a puddle on the way home because she had broken one? Then the girl, the older girl Polly, who had cleaned her shoes for her, and lent her a pinafore? No! Laura opened her eyes again — it was no good straining to remember. Too many years had rolled between that early visit and her present self — years during which there had been no communication of any sort between Stephen Fountain and his cousins.

Why had Augustina been so trying and tiresome about the Masons? Instead of flying to her cousins on the earliest possible opportunity, here was a whole fortnight gone since her arrival, and it was not till this Sunday morning that Laura had been able to achieve her visit. Augustina had been constantly ailing or fretful; either unwilling to be left alone, or possessed by absurd desires for useless trifles, only to

be satisfied by Laura's going to shop in Whinthorpe. And such melancholy looks whenever the Masons were mentioned — coupled with so formal a silence on Mr. Helbeck's part! What did it all mean? No doubt her relations were vulgar, low-born folk! — but she did not ask Mr. Helbeck or her stepmother to entertain them. At last there had been a passage of arms between her and her stepmother. Perhaps Mr. Helbeck had overheard it, for immediately afterwards he had emerged from his study into the hall, where she and Augustina were sitting.

"Miss Fountain — may I ask — do you wish to be sent into Whinthorpe on Sunday morning?"

She had fronted him at once.

"No, thank you, Mr. Helbeck. I don't go to church — I never did with papa."

Had she been defiant? He surely had been stiff.

"Then, perhaps you would like the pony — for your visit? He is quite at your service for the day. Would that suit you?"

"Perfectly."

So here she was — at last! — climbing up and up into the heart of the fells. The cloud-pageant round the high mountains, the valley with its flashing streams, its distant sands, and widening sea — she had risen as it seemed above them all; they lay

beneath her in a map-like unity. She could have laughed and sung out of sheer physical joy in the dancing air — in the play of the cloud gleams and shadows as they swept across her, chased by the wind. All about her the little mountain sheep were feeding in the craggy "intaks" or along the edges of the tiny tumbling streams; and at intervals amid the reds and yellows of the still wintry grass rose great wind-beaten hollies, sharp and black against the blue distance, marching beside her, like scattered soldiers, up the height.

Not a house to be seen, save on the far slopes of distant hills — not a sound, but the chink of the stone-chat, or the fall of lonely water.

Soon the road, after its long ascent, began to dip; a few trees appeared in a hollow, then a gate and some grey walls.

Laura jumped from the cart. Beyond the gate, the road turned downward a little, and a great block of barns shut the farmhouse from view till she was actually upon it.

But there it was at last — the grey, roughly built house, that she still vaguely remembered, with the whitewashed porch, the stables and cowsheds opposite, the little garden to the side, the steep fell behind

She stood with her hand on the pony, looking at

the house in some perplexity. Not a soul apparently had heard her coming. Nothing moved in the farmhouse or outside it. Was everybody at church? But it was nearly one o'clock.

The door under the deep porch had no knocker, and she looked in vain for a bell. All she could do was to rap sharply with the handle of her whip.

No answer. She rapped again — louder and louder. At last in the intervals of knocking, she became conscious of a sound within — something deep and continuous, like the buzzing of a gigantic bee.

She put her ear to the door, listening. Then all her face dissolved in laughter. She raised her arm and brought the whip-handle down noisily on the old blistered door, so that it shook again.

"Hullo!"

There was a sudden sound of chairs overturned, or dragged along a flagged floor. Then staggering steps — and the door was opened.

"I say — what's all this — what are you making such a damned noise for?"

Inside stood a stalwart young man, still half asleep, and drawing his hand irritably across his blinking eyes.

"How do you do, Mr. Mason?"

The young man drew himself together with a start. Suddenly he perceived that the young girl

standing in the shade of the porch was not his sister, but a stranger. He looked at her with astonishment, — at the elegance of her dress, and the neatness of her small gloved hand.

"I beg your pardon, Miss, I'm sure! Did you want anything?"

The visitor laughed. "Yes, I want a good deal! I came up to see my cousins — you're my cousin — though of course you don't remember me. I thought — perhaps — you'd ask me to dinner."

The young man's yawns ceased. He stared with all his eyes, instinctively putting his hair and collar straight.

"Well, I'm afraid I don't know who you are, Miss," he said at last, putting out his hand in perplexity to meet hers. "Will you walk in?"

"Not before you know who I am!" — said Laura, still laughing — "I'm Laura Fountain. Now do you know?"

"What — Stephen Fountain's daughter — as married Miss Helbeck?" said the young man in wonder. His face, which had been at first vague and heavy with sleep, began to recover its natural expression.

Laura surveyed him. He had a square, full chin and an upper lip slightly underhung. His straight fair hair straggled loose over his brow. He carried his head and shoulders well, and was altogether a finely

built, rather magnificent young fellow, marred by a general expression that was half clumsy, half insolent.

"That's it," she said, in answer to his question — 'I'm staying at Bannisdale, and I came up to see you all. — Where's Cousin Elizabeth?"

"Mother, do you mean? — Oh! she's at church."

"Why aren't you there, too?"

He opened his blue eyes, taken aback by the cool clearness of her voice.

"Well, I can't abide the parson — if you want to know. Shall I put up your pony?"

"But perhaps you've not had your sleep out?" said Laura, politely interrogative.

He reddened, and came forward with a slow and rather shambling gait.

"I don't know what else there is to do up here of a Sunday morning," he said, with a boyish sulkiness, as he began to lead the pony towards the stables opposite. "Besides, I was up half the night seeing to one of the cows."

"You don't seem to have many neighbours," said Laura, as she walked beside him.

"There's rooks and crows" (which he pronounced broadly — "craws") — "not much else, I can tell you. Shall I take the pony out?"

"Please. I'm afraid you'll have to put up with me for hours!"

She looked at him merrily, and he returned the scrutiny. She wore the same thin black dress in which Helbeck had admired her the day before, and above it a cloth jacket and cap, trimmed with brown fur. Mason was dazzled a moment by the milky whiteness of the cheek above the fur, by the brightness of the eyes and hair; then was seized with fresh shyness, and became extremely busy with the pony.

"Mother'll be back in about an hour," he said gruffly.

"Goodness! what'll you do with me till then?"

They both laughed, he with an embarrassment that annoyed him. He was not at all accustomed to find himself at a disadvantage with a good-looking girl.

"There's a good fire in the house, anyway," he said; "you'll want to warm yourself, I should think, after driving up here."

"Oh! I'm not cold — I say, what jolly horses!"

For Mason had thrown open the large worm-eaten door of the stables, and inside could be seen the heads and backs of two cart-horses, huge, majestic creatures, who were peering over the doors of their stalls, as though they had been listening to the conversation.

Their owner glanced at them indifferently.

"Aye, they're not bad. We bred 'em three years ago, and they've taken more'n one prize already. I

dare say old Daffady, now, as looks after them, would be sorry to part with them."

"I dare say he would. But why should he part with them?"

The young man hesitated. He was shaking down a load of hay for the pony, and Laura was leaning against the door of the stall watching his performance.

"Well, I reckon we shan't be farmin here all our lives," he said at last with some abruptness.

"Don't you like it then?"

"I'd get quit on it to-morrow if I could!"

His quick reply had an emphasis that astonished her.

"And your mother?"

"Oh! of course it's mother keeps me at it," he said, relapsing into the same accent of a sulky child that he had used once before.

Then he led his new cousin back to the farmhouse. By this time he was beginning to find his tongue and use his eyes. Laura was conscious that she was being closely observed, and that by a man who was by no means indifferent to women. She said to herself that she would try to keep him shy.

As they entered the farmhouse kitchen Mason hastened to pick up the chairs he had overturned in his sudden waking.

"I say, mother would be mad if she knew you'd

come into this scrow!" he said with vexation, kicking aside some sporting papers that were littered over the floors, and bringing forward a carved oak chair with a cushion to place it before the fire for her acceptance.

"Scrow? What's that?" said Laura, lifting her eyebrows. "Oh, please don't tidy any more. I really think you make it worse. Besides, it's all right. What a dear old kitchen!"

She had seated herself in the cushioned chair, and was warming a slender foot at the fire. Mason wished she would take off her hat — it hid her hair. But he could not flatter himself that she was in the least occupied with what he wished. Her attention was all given to her surroundings — to the old raftered room, with its glowing fire and deep-set windows.

Bright as the April sun was outside, it hardly penetrated here. Through the mellow dusk, as through the varnish of an old picture, one saw the different objects in a golden light and shade — the brass warming-pan hanging beside the tall eight-day clock — the table in front of the long window-seat, covered with its checked red cloth — the carved door of a cupboard in the wall bearing the date 1679 — the miscellaneous store of things packed away under the black rafters, dried herbs and tools, bundles of

list and twine, the spindles of old spinning wheels, cattle-medicines, and the like — the heavy oaken chairs — the settle beside the fire, with its hard cushions and scrolled back. It was a room for winter, fashioned by the needs of winter. By the help of that great peat fire, built up year by year from the spoils of the moss a thousand feet below, generations of human beings had fought with snow and storm, had maintained their little polity there on the heights, self-centred, self-supplied. Across the yard, commanded by the window of the farm-kitchen, lay the rude byres where the cattle were prisoned from October to April. The cattle made the wealth of the farm, and there must be many weeks when the animals and their masters were shut in together from the world outside by wastes of snow.

Laura shut her eyes an instant, imagining the goings to and fro — the rising on winter dawns to feed the stock; the shepherd on the fell-side, wrestling with sleet and tempest; the returns at night to food and fire. Her young fancy, already played on by the breath of the mountains, warmed to the farmhouse and its primitive life. Here surely was something more human — more poetic even — than the tattered splendour of Bannisdale.

She opened her eyes wide again, as though in defiance, and saw Hubert Mason looking at her.

Instinctively she sat up straight, and drew her foot primly under the shelter of her dress.

"I was thinking of what it must be in winter," she said hurriedly. "I know I should like it."

"What, this place?" He gave a rough laugh. "I don't see what for, then. It's bad enough in summer. In winter it's fit to make you cut your throat. I say, where are you staying?"

"Why, at Bannisdale!" said Laura in surprise. "You knew my stepmother was still living, didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't think aught about it," he said, falling into candour, because the beauty of her grey eyes, now that they were fixed fair and full upon him, startled him out of his presence of mind.

"I wrote to you — to Cousin Elizabeth — when my father died," she said simply, rather proudly, and the eyes were removed from him.

"Aye — of course you did," he said in haste. "But mother's never yan to talk aboot letters. And you haven't dropped us a line since, have you?" he added, almost with timidity.

"No. I thought I'd surprise you. We've been a fortnight at Bannisdale."

His face flushed and darkened.

"Then you've been a fortnight in a queer place!" he said with a sudden, almost a violent change of

tone. "I wonder you can bide so long under that man's roof!"

She stared.

"Do you mean because he disliked my father?"

"Oh, I don't know nowt about that!" He paused. His young face was crimson, his eyes angry and sinister. "He's a *snake*—is Helbeck!" he said slowly, striking his hands together as they hung over his knees.

Laura recoiled—instinctively straightening herself.

"Mr. Helbeck is quite kind to me," she said sharply. "I don't know why you speak of him like that. I'm staying there till my stepmother gets strong."

He stared at her, still red and obstinate.

"Helbeck an his house together stick in folk's gizzards aboot here," he said. "Yo'll soon find that oot. And good reason too. Did you ever hear of Teddy Williams?"

"Williams?" she said, frowning. "Was that the man that painted the chapel?"

Mason laughed and slapped his knee.

"Man, indeed? He was just a lad—down at Marsland School. I was there myself, you understand, the year after him. He was an awful clever lad—beat every one at books—an he could draw anything. You couldn't mak' much oot of his drawins, I daur say—they were queer sorts o' things. I never could

make head or tail on 'em myself. But old Jackson, our master, thowt a lot of 'em, and so did the passon down at Marsland. An his father an mother — well, they thowt he was going to make all their fortunes for 'em. There was a scholarship — or soomthin o' that sort — an he was to get it an go to college, an make 'em all rich. They were just common wheelwrights, you understand, down on t' Whinthorpe Road. But my word, Mr. Helbeck spoilt their game for 'em!"

He lifted another sod of turf from the basket and flung it on the fire. The animus of his tone and manner struck Laura oddly. But she was at least as curious to hear as he was anxious to tell. She drew her chair a little nearer to him.

"What did Mr. Helbeck do?"

Mason laughed.

"Well, he just made a Papist of Teddy — took him an done him — brown. He got hold on him in the park one evening — Teddy was drawing a picture of the bridge, you understand — 'ticed him up to his place soomhow — an Teddy was set to a job of paintin up at the chapel before you could say Jack Robinson. An in six months they'd settled it between 'em. Teddy wouldn't go to school no more. And one night he and his father had words — the owd man gie'd him a thrashing — and Teddy just cut and run. Next thing they heard he was at a Papist

school, somewhere over Lancashire way, an he sent word to his mother — she was dyin then, you understan — and she's dead since — that he'd gone to be a priest, an if they didn't like it, they might just do the other thing!"

"And the mother died?" said Laura.

"Aye — double quick! My mother went down to nurse her. An they sent Teddy back, just too late to see her. He come in two-three hours after they'd screwed her down. An his father chivvyed him oot — they wouldn't have him at the funeral. But folks were a deal madder with Mr. Helbeck, you understan, nor with Teddy. Teddy's father and brothers are chapel folk — Primitive Methodists they call 'em. They've got a big chapel in Whinthorpe — an they raised the whole place on Mr. Helbeck, and one night, coming out of Whinthorpe, he was set on by a lot of fellows, chapel fellows, a bit fresh, you understan. Father was there — he never denied it — not he! Helbeck just got into the old mill by the bridge in time, but they'd marked his face for him all the same."

"Ah!" said Laura, staring into the fire. She had just remembered a dark scar on Mr. Helbeck's forehead, under the strong ripples of black hair. "Go on — do!"

"Oh! afterwards there was a lot of men bound

over — father among 'em. There was a priest with Mr. Helbeck who got it hot too — that old chap Bowles — I dare say you've seen him. Aye, he's a *snake*, is Helbeck!" the young man repeated. Then he reddened still more deeply, and added with vindictive emphasis — "and an interfering, — hypocritical, — canting sort of party into t' bargain. He'd like to lord it over everybody aboot here, if he was let. But he's as poor as a church rat — who minds him?"

The language was extraordinary — so was the tone. Laura had been gazing at the speaker in a growing amazement.

"Thank you!" she said impetuously, when Mason stopped. "Thank you! — but, in spite of your story, I don't think you ought to speak like that of the gentleman I am staying with!"

Mason threw himself back in his chair. He was evidently trying to control himself.

"I didn't mean no offence," he said at last, with a return of the sulky voice. "Of course I understand that you're staying with the quality, and not with the likes of us."

Laura's face lit up with laughter. "What an extraordinary silly thing to say! But I don't mind — I'll forgive you — like I did years ago, when you pushed me into the puddle!"

"I pushed you into a puddle? But — I never did

owt o' t' sort!" cried Mason, in a slow crescendo of astonishment.

"Oh, yes, you did," she nodded her little head. "I broke an egg, and you bullied me. Of course I thought you were a horrid boy — and I loved Polly, who cleaned my shoes and put me straight. Where's Polly, is she at church?"

"Aye — I dare say," said Mason stupidly, watching his visitor meanwhile with all his eyes. She had just put up a small hand and taken off her cap. Now, mechanically, she began to pat and arrange the little curls upon her forehead, then to take out and replace a hairpin or two, so as to fasten the golden mass behind a little more securely. The white fingers moved with an exquisite sureness and daintiness, the lifted arms showed all the young curves of the girl's form.

Suddenly Laura turned to him again. Her eyes had been staring dreamily into the fire, while her hands had been busy with her hair.

"So you don't remember our visit at all? You don't remember papa?"

He shook his head.

"Ah! well" — she sighed. Mason felt unaccountably guilty.

"I was always terr'ble bad at remembering," he said hastily.

"But you ought to have remembered papa." Then, in quite a different voice, "Is this your sitting-room" —she looked round it—"or—or your kitchen?"

The last words fell rather timidly, lest she might have hurt his feelings.

Mason jumped up.

"Why, yon's the parlour," he said. "I should ha' taken you there fust thing. Will you coom? I'll soon make a fire."

And walking across the kitchen, he threw open a further door ceremoniously. Laura followed, pausing just inside the threshold to look round the little musty sitting-room, with its framed photographs, its woollen mats, its rocking-chairs, and its square of mustard-coloured carpet. Mason watched her furtively all the time, to see how the place struck her.

"Oh, this isn't as nice as the kitchen," she said decidedly. "What's that?" She pointed to a pewter cup standing stately and alone upon the largest possible wool mat in the centre of a table.

Mason threw back his head and chuckled. His great chest seemed to fill out; all his sulky constraint dropped away.

"Of course you doan't know anythin aboot these parts," he said to her with condescension. "You don't know as I came near bein champion for the

County lasst year — no, I'll reckon you don't. Oh! that cup's nowt — that's nobbut Whinthorpe sports, lasst December. Maybe there'll be a better there, by-and-by."

The young giant grinned, as he took up the cup and pointed with assumed indifference to its inscription.

"What — football?" said Laura, putting up her hand to hide a yawn. "Oh! I don't care about football. But I *love* cricket. Why — you've got a piano — and a new one!"

Mason's face cleared again — in quite another fashion.

"Do you know the maker?" he said eagerly. "I believe he's thowt a deal of by them as knows. I bought it myself out o' the sheep. The lambs had done fust-rate, — an I'd had more'n half the trooble of 'em, ony ways. So I took no heed o' mother. I went down straight to Whinthrupp, an paid the first instalment an browt it up in the cart mesel'. Mr. Castle — do yo knaw 'im? — he's the organist at the parish church — he came with me to choose it."

"And is it you that play it," said Laura wondering, "or your sister?"

He looked at her in silence for a moment — and she at him. His aspect seemed to change under her eyes. The handsome points of the face came out;

its coarseness and loutishness receded. And his manner became suddenly quiet and manly — though full of an almost tremulous eagerness.

"You like it?" she asked him.

"What — music? I should think so."

"Oh! I forgot — you're all musical in these northern parts, aren't you?"

He made no answer, but sat down to the piano and opened it. She leant over the back of a chair, watching him, half incredulous, half amused.

"I say — did you ever hear this? I believe it was some Cambridge fellow made it — Castle said so. He played it to me. And I can't get further than just a bit of it."

He raised his great hands and brought them down in a burst of chords that shook the little room and the raftered ceiling. Laura stared. He played on — played like a musician, though with occasional stumbling — played with a mingled energy and delicacy, an understanding and abandonment that amazed her — then grew crimson with the effort to remember — wavered — and stopped.

"Goodness!" — cried Laura. "Why, that's Stanford's music to the Eumenides! How on earth did you hear that? Go away. I can play it."

She pushed him away and sat down. He hung over her, his face smiling and transformed, while

her little hands struggled with the chords, found the after melody, pursued it, — with pauses now and then, in which he would strike in, prompting her, putting his hand down with hers — and finally, after modulations which she made her way through, with laughter and head-shakings, she fell into a weird dance, to which he beat time with hands and limbs, urging her with a rain of comments.

"Oh! my goody — isn't that rousing? Play that again — just that change — just once! Oh! Lord — isn't that good, that chord — and that bit afterwards, what a bass! — I say, *isn't* it a bass? Don't you like it — don't you like it *awfully?*"

Suddenly she wheeled round from the piano, and sat fronting him, her hands on her knees. He fell back into a chair.

"I say" — he said slowly — "you are a grand 'un! If I'd only known you could play like that!"

Her laugh died away. To his amazement she began to frown.

"I haven't played — ten notes — since papa died. He liked it so."

She turned her back to him, and began to look at the torn music at the top of the piano.

"But you will play — you'll play to me again" — he said beseechingly. — "Why, it would be a sin if you didn't play! Wouldn't I play if I could play

like you! I never had more than a lesson, now and again, from old Castle. I used to steal mother's eggs to pay him — I can play anything I hear — and I've made a song — old Castle's writing it down — he says he'll teach me to do it some day. But of course I'm no good for playing — I never shall be any good. Look at those fingers — they're like bits of stick — beastly things!"

He thrust them out indignantly for her inspection. Laura looked at them with a professional air.

"I don't call it a bad hand. I expect you've no patience."

"Haven't I! I tell you I'd play all day, if it 'ld do any good — but it won't."

"And how about the poor farm?" said Laura, with a lifted brow.

"Oh! the farm — the farm — dang the farm!" — said Mason violently, slapping his knee.

Suddenly there was a sound of voices outside, a clattering on the stones of the farmyard.

Mason sprang up, all frowns.

"That's mother. Here, let's shut the piano — quick! She can't abide it."

CHAPTER V

Mason went out to meet his mother, and Laura waited. She stood where she had risen, beside the piano, looking nervously towards the door. Childish remembrances and alarms seemed to be thronging back into her mind.

There was a noise of voices in the outer room. Then a handle was roughly turned, and Laura saw before her a short, stout woman, with grey hair, and the most piercing black eyes. Intimidated by the eyes, and by the sudden pause of the newcomer on the threshold, Miss Fountain could only look at her interrogatively.

"Is it Cousin Elizabeth?" she said, holding out a wavering hand.

Mrs. Mason scarcely allowed her own to be touched.

"We're not used to visitors i' church-time," she said abruptly, in a deep funereal voice. "Mappen you'll sit down."

And still holding the girl with her eyes, she walked across to an old rocking-chair, let herself fall into it, and with a loud sigh loosened her bonnet strings.

Laura, in her amazement, had to strangle a violent inclination to laugh. Then she flushed brightly, and sat down on the wooden stool in front of the piano. Mrs. Mason, still staring at her, seemed to wait for her to speak. But Laura would say nothing.

"Soa — thoo art Stephen Fountain's dowter — art tha?"

"Yes — and you have seen me before," was the girl's quiet reply.

She said to herself that her cousin had the eyes of a bird of prey. So black and fierce they were, in the greyish white face under the shaggy hair. But she was not afraid. Rather she felt her own temper rising.

"How long is 't sen your feyther deed?"

"Nine months. But you knew that, I think — because I wrote it you."

Mrs. Mason's heavy lids blinked a moment, then she said with slowly quickening emphasis, like one mounting to a crisis:

"Wat art tha doin' wi' Bannisdale Hall? What call has thy feyther's dowter to be visitin onder Alan Helbeck's roof?"

Laura's open mouth showed first wonderment, then laughter.

"Oh! I see," she said impatiently — "you don't seem to understand. But of course you remember

that my father married Miss Helbeck for his second wife?"

"Aye, an she cam oot fra amang them," exclaimed Mrs. Mason; "she put away from her the accursed thing!"

The massive face was all aglow, transformed, with a kind of sombre fire. Laura stared afresh.

"She gave up being a Catholic, if that's what you mean," she said after a moment's pause. "But she couldn't keep to it. When papa fell ill, and she was unhappy, she went back. And then of course she made it up with her brother."

The triumph in Mrs. Mason's face yielded first to astonishment, then to anger.

"The poor weak doited thing," she said at last in a tone of indescribable contempt, "the poor silly fule! But naebody need ha' luked for onything betther from a Helbeck.— And I daur say"—she lifted her voice fiercely — "I daur say she took yo' wi' her, an it's along o' thattens as yo're coom to spy on us oop here?"

Laura sprang up.

"Me!" she said indignantly. "You think I'm a Catholic and a spy? How kind of you! But of course you don't know anything about my father, nor how he brought me up. As for my poor little stepmother, I came here with her to get her well, and I

shall stay with her till she is well. I really don't know why you talk to me like this. I suppose you have cause to dislike Mr. Helbeck, but it is very odd that you should visit it on me, papa's daughter, when I come to see you!"

The girl's voice trembled, but she threw back her slender neck with a gesture that became her. The door, which had been closed, stealthily opened. Hubert Mason's face appeared in the doorway. It was gazing eagerly — admiringly — at Miss Fountain.

Mrs. Mason did not see him. Nor was she daunted by Laura's anger.

"It's aw yan," she said stubbornly. "Thoo ha' made a covenant wi' the Amorite an the Amalekite. They ha' called tha, an thoo art eatin o' their sacrifices!"

There was an uneasy laugh from the door, and Laura, turning her astonished eyes in that direction, perceived Hubert standing in the doorway, and behind him another head thrust eagerly forward — the head of a young woman in a much betrimmed Sunday hat.

"I say, mother, let her be, wil tha?" said a hearty voice; and, pushing Hubert aside, the owner of the hat entered the room. She went up to Laura, and gave her a loud kiss.

"I'm Polly — Polly Mason. An I know who you are weel enough. Doan't you pay ony attention to

mother. That's her way. Hubert an I take it very kind of you to come and see us."

"Mother's rats on Amorites!" said Hubert, grinning.

"Rats? — Amorites?" — said Laura, looking piteously at Polly, whose hand she held.

Polly laughed, a bouncing, good-humoured laugh. She herself was a bouncing, good-humoured person, the apparent antithesis of her mother with her lively eyes, her frizzled hair, her high cheek-bones touched with a bright pink.

"Yo'll have to get oop early to understan' them two," she declared. "Mother's allus talkin out o' t' Bible, an Hubert picks up a lot o' low words out o' Whinthrupp streets — an there 'tis. But now look here — yo'll stay an tak' a bit o' dinner with us?"

"I don't want to be in your way," said Laura formally. Really, she had some difficulty to control the quiver of her lips, though it would have been difficult to say whether laughter or tears came nearest.

At this Polly broke out in voluble protestations, investigating her cousin's dress all the time, fingering her little watch-chain, and even taking up a corner of the pretty cloth jacket that she might examine the quality of it. Laura, however, looked at Mrs. Mason.

"If Cousin Elizabeth wishes me to stay," she said proudly.

Polly burst into another loud laugh.

"Yo see, it goes agen mother to be shakin hands wi' yan that's livin wi' Papists — and Misther Helbeck by the bargain. So wheniver mother talks aboot Amorites or Jebusites, or any o' thattens, she nobbut means Papist — Romanists as our minister coes 'em. He's every bit as bad as her. He would as lief shake hands wi' Mr. Helbeck as wi' the owd 'un!"

"I'll uphowd ye — Mr. Bayley hasn't preached a sermon this ten year wi'oot chivvyin Papists!" said Hubert from the door. "An yo'll not find yan o' them in his parish if yo were to hunt it wi' a lantern for a week o' Sundays. When I was a lad I thowt Romanists were a soart o' varmin. I awmost looked to see 'em nailed to t' barndoor, same as stöats!"

"But how strange!" cried Laura — "when there are so few Catholics about here. And no one *hates* Catholics now. One may just — despise them."

She looked from mother to son in bewilderment. Not only Hubert's speech, but his whole manner had broadened and coarsened since his mother's arrival.

"Well, if there isn't mony, they make a deal o' talk," said Polly — "onyways sence Mr. Helbeck came to t' hall. — Mother, I'll take Miss Fountain oopstairs, to get her hat off."

During all the banter of her son and daughter Mrs. Mason had sat in a disdainful silence, turning her

strange eyes — the eyes of a fanatic, in a singularly shrewd and capable face — now on Laura, now on her children. Laura looked at her again, irresolute whether to go or stay. Then an impulse seized her which astonished herself. For it was an impulse of liking, an impulse of kinship; and as she quickly crossed the room to Mrs. Mason's side, she said in a pretty pleading voice:

"But you see, Cousin Elizabeth, I'm not a Catholic — and papa wasn't a Catholic. And I couldn't help Mrs. Fountain going back to her old religion — you shouldn't visit it on me!"

Mrs. Mason looked up.

"Why art tha not at church on t' Lord's day?"

The question came stern and quick.

Laura wavered, then drew herself up.

"Because I'm not your sort either. I don't believe in your church, or your ministers. Father didn't, and I'm like him."

Her voice had grown thick, and she was quite pale. The old woman stared at her.

"Then yo're nobbut yan o' the heathen!" she said with slow precision.

"I dare say!" cried Laura, half laughing, half crying. "That's my affair. But I declare I think I hate Catholics as much as you — there, Cousin Elizabeth! I don't hate my stepmother, of course. I

promised father to take care of her. But that's another matter."

"Dost tha hate Alan Helbeck?" said Mrs. Mason suddenly, her black eyes opening in a flash.

The girl hesitated, caught her breath — then was seized with the strangest, most abject desire to propitiate this grim woman with the passionate look.

"Yes!" she said wildly. "No, no! — that's silly. I haven't had time to hate him. But I don't like him, anyway. I'm nearly sure I *shall* hate him!"

There was no mistaking the truth in her tone.

Mrs. Mason slowly rose. Her chest heaved with one long breath, then subsided; her brow tightened. She turned to her son.

"Art tha goin to let Daffady do all thy work for tha?" she said sharply. "Has t' roan calf bin looked to?"

"Aye — I'm going," said Hubert evasively, and sheepishly straightening himself he made for the front door, throwing back more than one look as he departed at his new cousin.

"And you really want me to stay?" repeated Laura insistently, addressing Mrs. Mason.

"Yo're welcome," was the stiff reply. "Nobbut yo'd been mair welcome if yo hadna brokken t' Sabbath to coom here. Mappen yo'll goa wi' Polly, an tak' your bonnet off."

Laura hesitated a moment longer, bit her lip, and went.

Polly Mason was a great talker. In the few minutes she spent with Laura upstairs, before she hurried down again to help her mother with the Sunday dinner, she asked her new cousin innumerable questions, showing an intense curiosity as to Bannisdale and the Helbecks, a burning desire to know whether Laura had any money of her own, or was still dependent upon her stepmother, and a joyous appropriative pride in Miss Fountain's gentility and good looks.

The frankness of Polly's flatteries, and the exuberance of her whole personality, ended by producing a certain stiffness in Laura. Every now and then, in the intervals of Polly's questions, when she ceased to be inquisitive and became confidential, Laura would wonder to herself. She would half shut her eyes, trying to recall the mental image of her cousins and of the farm, with which she had started that morning from Bannisdale; or she would think of her father, his modes of life and speech — was he really connected, and how, with this place and its inmates? She had expected something simple and patriarchal. She had found a family of peasants, living in a struggling, penurious way — a grim mother speaking broad

dialect, a son with no pretensions to refinement or education, except perhaps through his music — and a daughter ——

Laura turned an attentive eye on Polly, on her high and red cheek-bones, the extravagant fringe that vulgarised all her honest face, the Sunday dress of stone-coloured alpaca, profusely trimmed with magenta ribbons.

"I will — I *will* like her!" she said to herself — "I am a horrid, snobbish, fastidious little wretch."

But her spirits had sunk. When Polly left her she leant for a moment upon the sill of the open window, and looked out. Across the dirty, uneven yard, where the manure lay in heaps outside the byre doors, she saw the rude farm buildings huddled against each other in a mean, unsightly group. Down below, from the house porch apparently, a cracked bell began to ring, and from some doors opposite three labourers, the "hired men," who lived and boarded on the farm, came out. The first two were elderly men, gnarled and bent like tough trees that have fought the winter; the third was a youth. They were tidily dressed in Sunday clothes, for their work was done, and they were ready for the afternoon's holiday.

They walked across to the farmhouse in silence, one behind the other. Not even the young fellow raised his eyes to the window and the girl framed within it.

Behind them came a gust of piercing easterly wind. A cloud had covered the sun. The squalid farmyard, the bare fell-side beyond it, the distant levels of the marsh, had taken to themselves a cold forbidding air. Laura again imagined it in December — a waste of snow, with the farm making an ugly spot upon the white, and the little black-bearded sheep she could see feeding on the fell, crowding under the rocks for shelter. But this time she shivered. All the spell was broken. To live up here with this madwoman, this strange youth — and Polly! Yet it seemed to her that something drew her to Cousin Elizabeth — if she were not so mad. How strange to find this abhorrence of Mr. Helbeck among these people — so different, so remote! She remembered her own words — "I am sure I *shall* hate him!" — not without a stab of conscience. What had she been doing — perhaps — but adding her own injustice to theirs?

She stood lost in a young puzzle and heat of feeling — half angry, half repentant.

But only for a second. Then certain phrases of Augustina's rang through her mind — she saw herself standing in the corner of the chapel while the others prayed. Every pulse tightened — her whole nature leapt again in defiance. She seemed to be holding something at bay — a tyrannous power that threatened humiliation and hypocrisy, that seemed at the

same time to be prying into secret things — things it should never, never know — and never rule!

Yes, she did understand Cousin Elizabeth — she *did!*

The dinner went sadly. The viands were heavy: so were the faces of the labourers, and the air of the low-raftered kitchen, heated as it was by a huge fire, and pervaded by the smell from the farmyard. Laura felt it all very strange, the presence of the farm servants at the same table with the Masons and herself — the long silences that no one made an effort to break — the relations between Hubert and his mother.

As for the labourers, Mason addressed them now and then in a bullying voice, and they spoke to him as little as they could. It seemed to Laura that there was an alliance between them and the mother against a lazy and incompetent master; and that the lad's vanity was perpetually alive to it. Again and again he would pull himself together, attempt the gentleman, and devote himself to his young lady guest. But in the midst of their conversation he would hear something at the other end of the table, and suddenly there would come a burst of fierce unintelligible speech between him and the mistress of the house, while the labourers sat silent and sly, and Polly's loud laugh would break in, trying to make peace.

Laura's cool grey eyes followed the youth with a constant critical wonder. In any other circumstances she would not have thought him worth an instant's attention. She had all the supercilious impatience of the pretty girl accustomed to choose her company. But this odd fact of kinship held and harassed her. She wanted to understand these Masons — her father's folk.

"Now he is really talking quite nicely," she said to herself on one occasion, when Hubert had found in the gifts and accomplishments of his friend Castle, the organist, a subject that untied his tongue and made him almost agreeable. Suddenly a question caught his ear.

"Daffady, did tha turn the coo?" said his mother in a loud voice. Even in the homeliest question it had the same penetrating, passionate quality that belonged to her gaze — to her whole personality indeed.

Hubert dropped his phrase — and his knife and fork — and stared angrily at Daffady, the old cowman and carter.

Daffady threw his master a furtive look, then munched through a mouthful of bread and cheese without replying.

He was a grey and taciturn person, with a provocative look of patience.

"What tha bin doin wi' th' coo?" said Hubert sharply. "I left her mysel nobbut half an hour sen."

Daffady turned his head again in Hubert's direction for a moment, then deliberately addressed the mistress.

"Aye, aye, missus" — he spoke in a high small voice — "A turned her reet enoof, an a gied her soom fresh straa for her yed. She doin varra middlin."

"If she'd been turned yesterday in a proper fashion, she'd ha' bin on her feet by now," said Mrs. Mason, with a glance at her son.

"Nowt o' t' soart, mother," cried Hubert. He leant forward, flushed with wrath, or beer — his potations had begun to fill Laura with dismay — and spoke with a hectoring violence. "I tell tha when t' farrier cam oop last night, he said she'd been managed first-rate! If yo and Daffady had yor way wi' yor fallals an yor nonsense, yo'd never leave a poor sick creetur alone for five minutes; I towd Daffady to let her be, an I'll let him knaa who's mëaster here!"

He glared at the carter, quite regardless of Laura's presence. Polly coughed loudly, and tried to make a diversion by getting up to clear away the plates. The three combatants took no notice.

Daffady slowly ran his tongue round his lips; then he said, again looking at the mistress:

"If a hadna turned her I dew believe she'd ha' gien oos t' slip — she was terr'ble swollen as 'twos."

"I tell tha to let her be!" thundered Hubert. "If she deas, that's ma consarn; I'll ha' noa meddlin wi' my orders — dost tha hear?"

"Aye, it wor thirrty poond thraan awa lasst month, an it'll be thirrty poond this," said his mother slowly; "thoo art fine at shoutin. Bit thy fadther had need ha' addlet his brass — to gie thee summat to thraw oot o' winder."

Hubert rose from the table with an oath, stood for an instant looking down at Laura, — glowering, and pulling fiereely at his moustache, — then, noisily opening the front door, he strode across the yard to the byres.

There was an instant's silence. Then Mrs. Mason rose with her hands clasped before her, her eyes half closed.

"For what we ha' received, the Lord mak' us truly thankful," she said in a loud, nasal voice. "Amen."

After dinner, Laura put on an apron of Polly's, and helped her cousin to clear away. Mrs. Mason had gruffly bade her sit still, but when the girl persisted, she herself — flushed with dinner and combat — took her seat on the settle, opposite to old Daffady, and deliberately made holiday, watching

Stephen's daughter all the time from the black eyes that roved and shone so strangely under the shaggy brows and the white hair.

The old cowman sat hunched over the fire, smoking his pipe for a time in beatific silence.

But presently Laura, as she went to and fro, caught snatches of conversation.

"Did tha go ta Laysgill last Sunday?" said Mrs. Mason abruptly.

Daffady removed his pipe.

"Aye, a went, an a preeched. It wor a varra stirrin meetin. Sum o' yor paid preests sud ha' bin theer. A gien it 'em strang. A tried ta hit 'em all — baith gert an lile."

There was a pause, then he added placidly:

"A likely suden't suit them varra weel. Theer was a mon beside me, as pooed me down afoor a'd hofe doon."

"Tha sudna taak o' 'paid preests,' Daffady," said Mrs. Mason severely. "Tha doosna understand nowt o' thattens."

Daffady glanced slyly at his mistress — at the "Church-pride" implied in the attitude of her capacious form, in the shining of the Sunday alpaca and black silk apron.

"Mebbe not," he said mildly, "mebbe not." And he resumed his pipe.

On another occasion, as Laura went flitting across the kitchen, drawing to herself the looks of both its inmates, she heard what seemed to be a fragment of talk about a funeral.

"Aye, poor Jenny!" said Mrs. Mason. "They didna mak' mich account on her whan t' breath wor yanst oot on her."

"Nay,"—Daffady shook his head for sympathy,—"it wor a varra poor set-oot, wor Jenny's buryin. Nowt but tay, an sic-like."

Mrs. Mason raised two gaunt hands and let them drop again on her knee.

"I shud ha' thowt they'd ha' bin ashamed," she said. "Jenny's brass ull do 'em noa gude. She wor a fule to leave it to 'un."

Daffady withdrew his pipe again. His lantern-jawed face, furrowed with slow thought, hung over the blaze.

"Aye," he said, "aye. Wal, I've buried three childer—an I'm nobbut a labrin mon—but a thank the Lord I ha buried them aw—wi' ham."

The last words came out with solemnity. Laura, at the other end of the kitchen, turned open-mouthed to look at the pair. Not a feature moved in either face. She sped back into the dairy, and Polly looked up in astonishment.

"What ails tha?" she said.

"Oh, nothing!" said Laura, dashing the merry tears from her eyes. She proceeded to roll up her sleeves, and plunge her hands and arms into the bowl of warm water that Polly had set before her. Meanwhile, Polly, very big and square, much reddened also by the fuss of household work, stood just behind her cousin's shoulder, looking down, half in envy, half in admiration, at the slimness of the white wrists and pretty fingers.

A little later the two girls, all traces of their housework removed, came back into the kitchen. Daffady and Mrs. Mason had disappeared.

"Where is Cousin Elizabeth?" said Laura rather sharply, as she looked round her.

Polly explained that her mother was probably shut up in her bedroom reading her Bible. That was her custom on a Sunday afternoon.

"Why, I haven't spoken to her at all!" cried Laura. Her cheek had flushed.

Polly showed embarrassment.

"Next time yo coom, mother 'll tak' mair noatice. She was takkin stock o' you t' whole time, I'll uphowd yo."

"That isn't what I wanted," said Laura.

She walked to the window and leaned her head against the frame. Polly watched her with compunction, seeing quite plainly the sudden drop of the lip.

All she could do was to propose to show her cousin the house.

Laura languidly consented.

So they wandered again through the dark stone-slabbed dairy, with its milk pans on the one side and its bacon-curing troughs on the other; and into the little stuffy bedrooms upstairs, each with its small oak four-poster and patchwork counterpane. They looked at the home-made quilt of goosedown — Polly's handiwork — that lay on Hubert's bed; at the clusters of faded photographs and coloured prints that hung on the old uneven walls; at the vast meal-ark in Polly's room that held the family store of meal and oatcake for the year.

"When we wor little 'uns, fadther used to give me an Hubert a silver saxpence the day he browt home t' fresh melder fro' t' mill," said Polly; "theer was parlish little nobbut paritch and oatcake to eat when we wor small. An now I'll uphold yo there isn't a farm servant but wants his white bread yanst a day whativver happens."

The house was neat and clean, but there were few comforts in it, and no luxuries. It showed, too, a number of small dilapidations that a very little money and care would soon have set to rights. Polly pointed to them sadly. There was no money, and Hubert didn't trouble himself. "Fadther was

allus workin. He'd be up at half-past four this time o' year, an he didna go to bed soa early noather. But Hubert 'ull do nowt he can help. Yo can hardly get him to tak' t' peäts i' ter Whinthorpe when t' peät-cote's brastin wi' 'em. An as fer doin a job o' cartin fer t' neebors, t' horses may be eatin their heads off, Hubert woan't stir hissel'. 'Let 'em lead their aan muck for theirsels' — that's what he'll say. Iver sen fadther deed it's bin janglin atwixt mother an Hubert. It makes her mad to see iverything goin downhill. An he's that masterful he woan't be towd. Yo saw how he went on wi' Daffady at dinner. But if it weren't for Daffady an us, there'd be no stock left."

And poor Polly, sitting on the edge of the meal-ark and dangling her large feet, went into a number of plaintive details, that were mostly unintelligible, sometimes repulsive, in Laura's ears.

It seemed that Hubert was always threatening to leave the farm. "Give me a bit of money, and you'll soon be quit of me. I'll go to Froswick, and make my fortune" — that was what he'd say to his mother. But who was going to give him money to throw about? And he couldn't sell the farm while Mrs. Mason lived, by the father's will.

As to her mother, Polly admitted that she was "gey ill to live wi'." There was no one like her for "addlin a bit here and addlin a bit there."

She was the best maker and seller of butter in the country-side; but she had been queer about religion ever since an illness that attacked her as a young woman.

And now it was Mr. Bayley, the minister, who excited her, and made her worse. Polly, for her part, hated him. "My worrd, he do taak!" said she. And every Sunday he preached against Catholics, and the Pope, and such like. And as there were no Catholics anywhere near, but Mr. Helbeck at Bannisdale, and a certain number at Whinthorpe, people didn't know what to make of him. And they laughed at him, and left off going — except occasionally for curiosity, because he preached in a black gown, which, so Polly heard tell, was very uncommon nowadays. But mother would listen to him by the hour. And it was all along of Teddy Williams. It was that had set her mad.

Here, however, Polly broke off to ask an eager question. What had Mr. Helbeck said when Laura told him of her wish to go and see her cousins?

"I'll warrant he wasn't best pleased! Feyther couldn't abide him — because of Teddy. He didn't thraw no stones that neet i' Whinthrupp Lane — feyther was a strict man and read his Bible reg'lar — but he stood wi' t' lads an looked on — he didn't say owt to stop 'em. Mr. Helbeck called to him —

he had a priest with him — 'Mr. Mason!' he ses, 'this is an old man — speak to those fellows!' But feyther wouldn't. 'Let 'em trounce tha!' he ses — 'aye, an him too! It'ull do tha noa harm.' — Well, an what did he say, Mr. Helbeck? — I'd like to know."

"Say? Nothing — except that it was a long way, and I might have the pony carriage."

Laura's tone was rather dry. She was sitting on the edge of Polly's bed, with her arm round one of its oaken posts. Her cheek was laid against the post, and her eyes had been wandering about a good deal while Polly talked. Till the mention of Helbeck. Then her attention came back. And during Polly's account of the incident in Whinthorpe Lane, she began to frown. What bigotry, after all! As to the story of young Williams — it was very perplexing — she would get the truth of it out of Augustina. But it was extraordinary that it should be so well known in this upland farm — that it should make a kind of link — a link of hatred — between Mr. Helbeck and the Masons. After her movement of wild sympathy with Mrs. Mason, she realised now, as Polly's chatter slipped on, that she understood her cousins almost as little as she did Helbeck.

Nay, more. The picture of Helbeck stoned and

abused by these rough, uneducated folk had begun to rouse in her a curious sympathy. Unwillingly her mind invested him with a new dignity.

So that when Polly told a rambling story of how Mr. Bayley, after the street fight, had met Mr. Helbeck at a workhouse meeting and had placed his hands behind his back when Mr. Helbeck offered his own, Laura tossed her head.

"What a ridiculous man!" she said disdainfully; "what can it matter to Mr. Helbeck whether Mr. Bayley shakes hands with him or not?"

Polly looked at her in some astonishment, and dropped the subject. The elder woman, conscious of plainness and inferiority, was humbly anxious to please her new cousin. The girl's delicate and characteristic physique, her clear eyes and decided ways, and a certain look she had in conversation — half absent, half critical — which was inherited from her father, — all of them combined to intimidate the homely Polly, and she felt perhaps less at ease with her visitor as she saw more of her.

Presently they stood before some old photographs on Polly's mantelpiece; Polly looked timidly at her cousin.

"Doan't yo think as Hubert's verra handsome?" she said.

And taking up one of the portraits, she brushed it with her sleeve and handed it to Laura.

Laura held it up for scrutiny.

"No—o," she said coolly, "not really handsome."

Polly looked disappointed.

"There's not a mony gells aboot here as doan't coe Hubert handsome," she said with emphasis.

"It's Hubert's business to call the girls handsome," said Laura, laughing, and handing back the picture.

Polly grinned — then suddenly looked grave.

"I wish he'd leave t' gells alone!" she said with an accent of some energy, "he'll mappen get into trooble yan o' these days!"

"They don't keep him in his place, I suppose," said Laura, flushing, she hardly knew why. She got up and walked across the room to the window. What did she want to know about Hubert and "t' gells"? She hated vulgar and lazy young men! — though they might have a musical gift that, so to speak, did not belong to them.

Nevertheless she turned round again to ask, with some imperiousness, —

"Where is your brother? — what is he doing all this time?"

"Sittin alongside the coo, I dare say — lest Daffady should be gettin the credit of her," said Polly, laughing. "The poor creetur fell three days sen — summat like a stroke, t' farrier said, — an Hubert's bin that jealous o' Daffady iver sen. He's actually poo'ed

hissel' oot o' bed mornins to luke after her! — Lord bless us — I mun goa an feed t' calves!"

And hastily throwing an apron over her Sunday gown, Polly clattered down the stairs in a whirlwind.

Laura followed her more leisurely, passed through the empty kitchen and opened the front door.

As she stood under the porch looking out, she put up a small hand to hide a yawn. When she set out that morning she had meant to spend the whole day at the farm. Now it was not yet tea-time, and she was more than ready to go. In truth her heart was hot, and rather bitter. Cousin Elizabeth, certainly, had treated her with a strange coolness. And as for Hubert — after that burst of friendship, beside the piano! She drew herself together sharply — she would go at once and ask him for her pony cart.

Lifting her skirt daintily, she picked her way across the dirty yard, and fumbled at a door opposite — the door whence she had seen old Daffady come out at dinner-time.

"Who's there?" shouted a threatening voice from within.

Laura succeeded in lifting the clumsy latch. Hubert Mason, from inside, saw a small golden head appear in the doorway.

"Would you kindly help me get the pony cart?" said the light, half-sarcastic voice of Miss Fountain. "I must be going, and Polly's feeding the calves."

Her eyes at first distinguished nothing but a row of dim animal forms, in crowded stalls under a low roof. Then she saw a cow lying on the ground, and Hubert Mason beside her, amid the wreaths of smoke that he was puffing from a clay pipe. The place was dark, close, and fetid. She withdrew her head hastily. There was a muttering and movement inside, and Mason came to the door, thrusting his pipe into his pocket.

"What do you want to go for, just yet?" he said abruptly.

"I ought to get home."

"No; you don't care for us, nor our ways. That's it; an I don't wonder."

She made polite protestations, but he would not listen to them. He strode on beside her in a stormy silence, till the impulse to prick him overmastered her.

"Do you generally sit with the cows?" she asked him sweetly. She shot her grey eyes towards him, all mockery and cool examination. He was not accustomed to such looks from the young women whom he chose to notice.

"I was not going to stay and be treated like that before strangers!" he said, with a sulky fierceness.

"Mother thinks she and Daffady can just have their own way with me, as they'd used to do when I was nobbut a lad. But I'll let her know — aye, and the men too!"

"But if you hate farming, why don't you let Daffady do the work?"

Her sly voice stung him afresh.

"Because I'll be mëaster!" he said, bringing his hand violently down on the shaft of the pony cart. "If I'm to stay on in this beastly hole I'll make every one knaw their place. Let mother give me some money, an I'll soon take myself off, an leave her an Daffady to draw their own water their own way. But if I'm here I'm *mëaster!*" He struck the cart again.

"Is it true you don't work nearly as hard as your father?"

He looked at her amazed. If Susie Flinders down at the mill had spoken to him like that, he would have known how to shut her mouth for her.

"An I daur say it is," he said hotly. "I'm not goin to lead the dog's life my father did — all for the sake of diddlin another sixpence or two oot o' the neighbours. Let mother give me my money oot o' the farm. I'd go to Froswick fast enough. That's the place to get on. I've got friends — I'd work up in no time."

Laura glanced at him. She said nothing.

"You doan't think I would?" he asked her angrily, pausing in his handling of the harness to throw back the challenge of her manner. His wrath seemed to have made him handsomer, better-braced, more alive. Physically she admired him for the first time, as he stood confronting her.

But she only lifted her eyebrows a little.

"I thought one had to have a particular kind of brains for business — and begin early, too?"

"I could learn," he said gruffly, after which they were both silent till the harnessing was done.

Then he looked up.

"I'd like to drive you to the bridge — if you're agreeable?"

"Oh, don't trouble yourself, pray!" she said in polite haste.

His brows knit again.

"I know how 'tis — you won't come here again."

Her little face changed.

"I'd like to," she said, her voice wavering, "because papa used to stay here."

He stared at her.

"I do remember Cousin Stephen," he said at last, "though I towd you I didn't. I can see him standing at the door there — wi' a big hat — an a beard — like straw — an a check coat wi' great bulgin pockets."

He stopped in amazement, seeing the sudden beauty of her eyes and cheeks.

"That's it," she said, leaning towards him. "Oh, that's it!" She closed her eyes a moment, her small lips trembling. Then she opened them with a long breath.

"Yes, you may drive me to the bridge if you like."

And on the drive she was another being. She talked to him about music, so softly and kindly that the young man's head swam with pleasure. All her own musical enthusiasms and experiences — the music in the college chapels, the music at the Greek plays, the few London concerts and operas she had heard, her teachers and her hero-worships — she drew upon it all in her round light voice, he joining in from time to time with a rough passion and yearning that seemed to transfigure him. In half an hour, as it were, they were friends; their relations changed wholly. He looked at her with all his eyes; hung upon her with all his ears. And she — she forgot that he was vulgar and a clown; such breathless pleasure, such a humble absorption in superior wisdom, would have blunted the sternest standard.

As for him, the minutes flew. When at last the bridge over the Bannisdale River came in sight, he began to check the pony.

"Let's drive on a bit," he said entreatingly.

"No, no—I must get back to Mrs. Fountain." And she took the reins from his hands.

"I say, when will you come again?"

"Oh, I don't know." She had put on once more the stand-off town-bred manner that puzzled his countryman's sense.

"I say, mother shan't talk that stuff to you next time. I'll tell her—" he said imploringly.—"Halloa! let me out, will you?"

And to her amazement, before she could draw in the pony, he had jumped out of the cart.

"There's Mr. Helbeck!" he said to her with a crimson face. "I'm off. Good-bye!"

He shook her hand hastily, turned his back, and strode away.

She looked towards the gate in some bewilderment, and saw that Helbeck was holding it open for her. Beside him stood a tall priest — not Father Bowles. It was evident that both of them had seen her parting from her cousin.

Well, what then? What was there in that, or in Mr. Helbeck's ceremonious greeting, to make her cheeks hot all in a moment? She could have beaten herself for a silly lack of self-possession. Still more could she have beaten Hubert for his clownish and hurried departure. What was he afraid of? Did he think that she would have shown the smallest shame of her peasant relations?

CHAPTER VI

"Is that Mrs. Fountain's stepdaughter?" said Helbeck's companion, as Laura and her cart disappeared round a corner of the winding road on which the two men were walking.

Helbeck made a sign of assent.

"You may very possibly have known her father?" He named the Cambridge college of which Stephen Fountain had been a Fellow.

The Jesuit, who was a convert, and had been a distinguished Cambridge man, considered for a moment.

"Oh! yes — I remember the man! A strange being, who was only heard of, if I recollect right, in times of war. If there was any dispute going — especially on a religious point — Stephen Fountain would rush into it with broad-sheets. Oh, yes, I remember him perfectly — a great untidy, fair-haired, truculent fellow, to whom anybody that took any thought for his soul was either fool or knave. How much of him does the daughter inherit?"

Helbeck returned the other's smile. "A large

slice, I think. She comes here in the curious position of having never lived in a Christian household before, and she seems already to have great difficulty in putting up with us."

Father Leadham laughed, then looked reflective.

"How often have I known that the best of all possible beginnings! Is she attached to her stepmother?"

"Yes. But Mrs. Fountain has no influence over her."

"It is a striking colouring — that white skin and reddish hair. And it is a face of some power, too."

"Power?" Helbeck demurred. "I think she is clever," he said dryly. "And, of course, coming from a university town, she has heard of things that other girls know nothing of. But she has had no training, moral or intellectual."

"And no Christian education?"

Helbeck shrugged his shoulders.

"She was only baptized with difficulty. When she was eleven or twelve she was allowed to go to church two or three times, I understand, on the helot principle — was soon disgusted — her father of course supplying a running comment at home — and she has stood absolutely outside religion of all kinds since."

"Poor child!" said the priest with heartiness. The paternal note in the words was more than official. He was a widower, and had lost his wife and infant daughter two years before his entrance into the Church of Rome.

Helbeck smiled. "I assure you Miss Fountain spends none of her pity upon herself."

"I dare say more than you think. The position of the unbeliever in a house like yours is always a painful one. You see she is alone. There must be a sense of exile — of something touching and profound going on beside her, from which she is excluded. She comes into a house with a chapel, where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, where everybody is keeping a strict Lent. She has not a single thought in common with you all. No; I am very sorry for Miss Fountain."

Helbeck was silent a moment. His dark face showed a shade of disturbance.

"She has some relations near here," he said at last, "but unfortunately I can't do much to promote her seeing them. You remember Williams's story?"

"Of course. You had some local row, didn't you? Ah! I remember."

And the two men walked on, discussing a case which had been and was still of great interest to them as

Catholics. The hero, moreover — the Jesuit novice himself — was well known to them both.

"So Miss Fountain's relations belong to that peasant class?" said the Jesuit, musing. "How curious that she should find herself in such a double relation to you and Bannisdale!"

"Consider me a little, if you please," said Helbeck, with his slight, rare smile. "While that young lady is under my roof — you see how attractive she is — I cannot get rid, you will admit, of a certain responsibility. Augustina has neither the will nor the authority of a mother, and there is literally no one else. Now there happens to be a young man in this Mason family ——"

"Ah!" said the priest; "the young gentleman who jumped out at the bridge, with such a very light pair of heels?"

Helbeck nodded. "The old people were peasants and fanatics. They thought ill of me in the Williams affair, and the mother, who is still alive, would gladly hang and quarter me to-morrow if she could. But that is another point. The old people had their own dignity, their own manners and virtues — or, rather, the manners and virtues of their class. The old man was coarse and boorish, but he was hard-working and honourable, and a Christian after his own sort. But the old man is dead, and the son, who now works the farm

jointly with his mother, is of no class and no character. He has just education enough to despise his father and his father's hard work. He talks the dialect with his inferiors, or his kindred, and drops it with you and me. The old traditions have no hold upon him, and he is just a vulgar and rather vicious hybrid, who drinks more than is good for him and has a natural affinity for any sort of low love-affair. I came across him at our last hunt ball. I never go to such things, but last year I went."

"Good!" ejaculated the Jesuit, turning a friendly face upon the speaker.

Helbeck paused. The word, still more the emphasis with which it was thrown out, challenged him. He was about to defend himself against an implied charge, but thought better of it, and resumed:

"And unfortunately, considering the way in which all the clan felt towards me already, I found this youth in the supper-room, misbehaving himself with a girl of his own sort, and very drunk. I fetched a steward, and he was told to go. After which, you may imagine that it is scarcely agreeable to me to see my guest — a very young lady, very pretty, very distinguished — driving about the country in cousinly relations with this creature!"

The last words were spoken with considerable vivacity. The aristocrat and the ascetic, the man of

high family and the man of scrupulous and fastidious character, were alike expressed in them.

The Jesuit pondered a little.

"No; you will have to keep watch. Why not distract her? You must have plenty of other neighbours to show her."

Helbeck shook his head.

"I live like a hermit. My sister is in the first year of her widowhood and very delicate."

"I see." The Jesuit hesitated, then said, smiling, in the tone of one who makes a venture: "The Bishop and I allowed ourselves to discuss these cloistered ways of yours the other day. We thought you would forgive us as a pair of old friends."

"I know," was the somewhat quick interruption, "the Bishop is of Manning's temper in these things. He believes in acting on and with the Protestant world — in our claiming prominence as citizens. It was to please him that I joined one or two committees last year — that I went to the hunt ball ——"

Then, suddenly, in a very characteristic way, Helbeck checked his own flow of speech, and resumed more quietly: "Well, all that ——"

"Leaves you of the same opinion still?" said the Jesuit, smiling.

"Precisely. I don't belong to my neighbours, nor they to me. We don't speak the same language, and

I can't bring myself to speak theirs. The old conditions are gone, I know. But my feeling remains pretty much what that of my forefathers was. I recognise that it is not common nowadays — but I have the old maxim in my blood: 'Extra ecclesiam nulla salus.'"

"There is none which has done us more deadly harm in England," cried the Jesuit. "We forget that England is a baptized nation, and is therefore in the supernatural state."

"I remind myself of it very often," said Helbeck, with a kind of proud submission; "and I judge no man. But my powers, my time, are all limited. I prefer to devote them to the 'household of faith.'"

The two men walked on in silence for a time. Presently Father Leadham's face showed amusement, and he said:

"Certainly we modern converts have a better time of it than our predecessors! The Bishop tells me the most incredible things about the old feeling towards them in this Vicariate. And wherever I go I seem to hear the tale of the old priest who thanked God that he had never received anyone into the Church. Everybody has met someone who knew that old fellow! He may be a myth — but there is clearly history at the back of him!"

"I understand him perfectly," said Helbeck, smiling; and he added immediately, with a curious intensity, "I, too, have never influenced, never tried to influence, anyone in my life."

The priest looked at him, wondering.

"Not Williams?"

"Williams! But Williams was born for the faith. Directly he saw what I wanted to do in the chapel, he prayed to come and help me. It was his summer holiday — he neglected no duty; it was wonderful to see his happiness in the work — as I thought, an artistic happiness only. He used to ask me questions about the different saints; once or twice he borrowed a book — it was necessary to get the emblems correct. But I never said a single controversial word to him. I never debated religious subjects with him at all, till the night when he took refuge with me after his father had thrashed him so cruelly that he could not stand. Grace taught him, not I."

"Grace taught him, but through you," said the priest with quiet emphasis. "Perhaps I know more about that than you do."

Helbeck flushed.

"I think you are mistaken. At any rate, I should prefer that you were mistaken."

The priest raised his eyebrows.

"A man who holds 'no salvation outside the

Church,'" he said slowly, "and rejoices in the thought that he has never influenced anybody?"

"I should hope little from the work achieved by such an instrument. Some men have enough to do with their own souls," was the low but vehement answer.

The priest threw a wondering glance at his companion, at the signs of feeling — profound and morbid feeling — on the harsh face beside him.

"Perhaps you have never cared enough for anyone outside to wish passionately to bring them within," he said. "But if that ever happens to you, you will be ready — I think you will be ready — to use any tool, even yourself."

The priest's voice changed a little. Helbeck, somewhat startled, recalled the facts of Father Leadham's personal history, and thought he understood. The subject was instantly dropped, and the two men walked on to the house, discussing a great canonisation service at St. Peter's and the Pope's personal part in it.

The old Hall, as Helbeck and Father Leadham approached it, looked down upon a scene of animation to which in these latter days it was but little accustomed. The green spaces and gravelled walks in front of it were sprinkled with groups of chil-

dren in a blue-and-white uniform. Three or four Sisters of Mercy in their winged white caps moved about among them, and some of the children hung clustered like bees about the Sisters' skirts, while others ran here and there, gleefully picking the scattered daffodils that starred the grass.

The invaders came from the Orphanage of St. Ursula, a house founded by Mr. Helbeck's exertions, which lay half-way between Bannisdale and Whinthorpe. They had not long arrived, and were now waiting for Rosary and Benediction in the chapel before they were admitted to the tea which Mrs. Denton and Augustina had already spread for them in the big hall.

At sight of the children Helbeck's face lit up and his step quickened. They on their side ran to him from all parts; and he had hardly time to greet the Sisters in charge of them, before the eager creatures were pulling him into the walled garden behind the Hall, one small girl hanging on his hand, another perched upon his shoulder. Father Leadham went into the house to prepare for the service.

The garden was old and dark, like the Tudor house that stood between it and the sun. Rows of fantastic shapes carved in living yew and box stood ranged along the straight walks. A bowling-green enclosed in high beech hedges was placed in the exact centre

of the whole formal place, while the walks and alleys from three sides, west, north, and south, converged upon it, according to a plan unaltered since it was first laid down in the days of James II. At this time of the year there were no flowers in the stiff flower-beds; for Mr. Helbeck had long ceased to spend any but the most necessary monies upon his garden. Only upon the high stone walls that begirt this strange and melancholy pleasure-ground, and in the "wilderness" that lay on the eastern side, between the garden and the fell, were nature and the spring allowed to show themselves. Their joint magic had covered the old walls with fruit blossom and spread the "wilderness" with daffodils. Otherwise all was dark, tortured, fantastic, a monument of old-world caprice that the heart could not love, though piety might not destroy it.

The children, however, brought life and brightness. They chased each other up and down the paths, and in and out of the bowling-green. Helbeck set them to games, and played with them himself. Only for the orphans now did he ever thus recall his youth.

Two Sisters, one comparatively young, the other a woman of fifty, stood in an opening of the bowling-green, looking at the games.

The younger one said to her companion, who was the Superior of the orphanage, "I do like to see Mr.

Helbeck with the children! It seems to change him altogether."

She spoke with eager sympathy, while her eyes, the visionary eyes of the typical religious, sunk in a face that was at once sweet and peevish, followed the children and their host.

The other—shrewd-faced and large—had a movement of impatience.

"I should like to see Mr. Helbeck with some children of his own. For five years now I have prayed our Blessed Mother to give him a good wife. That's what he wants. Ah! Mrs. Fountain——"

And as Augustina advanced with her little languid air, accompanied by her stepdaughter, the Sisters gathered round her, chattering and cooing, showing her a hundred attentions, enveloping her in a homage that was partly addressed to the sister of their benefactor, and partly—as she well understood—to the sheep that had been lost and was found. To the stepdaughter they showed a courteous reserve. One or two of them had already made acquaintance with her, and had not found her amiable.

And, indeed, Laura held herself aloof, as before. But she shot a glance of curiosity at the elderly woman who had wished Mr. Helbeck a good wife. The girl had caught the remark as she and her stepmother turned the corner of the dense beechen

hedge that, with openings to each point of the compass, enclosed the bowling-green.

Presently Helbeck, stopping to take breath in a game of which he had been the life, caught sight of the slim figure against the red-brown of the hedge. The next moment he perceived that Miss Fountain was watching him with an expression of astonishment.

His first instinct was to let her be. Her manner towards him since her arrival, with hardly a break, had been such as to chill the most sociable temper. And Helbeck's temper was far from sociable.

But something in her attitude — perhaps its solitariness — made him uncomfortable. He went up to her, dragging with him a crowd of small children, who tugged at his coat and hands.

"Miss Fountain, will you take pity on us? My breath is gone."

He saw her hesitate. Then her sudden smile broke out.

"What'll you have?" she said, catching hold of the nearest child. "Mother Bunch?"

And off she flew, running, twisting, turning with the merriest of them, her loosened hair gleaming in the sun, her small feet twinkling. Now it was Helbeck's turn to stand and watch. What a curious grace and purpose there was in all her move-

ments! Even in her play Miss Fountain was a personality.

At last a little girl who was running with her began to drag and turn pale. Laura stopped to look at her.

"I can't run any more," said the child piteously. "I had a bone took out of my leg last year."

She was a sickly-looking creature, rickety and consumptive, a waif from a Liverpool slum. Laura picked her up and carried her to a seat in a yew arbour away from the games. Then the child studied her with shy-looking eyes, and suddenly slipped an arm like a bit of stick round the pretty lady's neck.

"Tell me a story, please, teacher," she said imploringly.

Laura was taken aback, for she had forgotten the tales of her own childhood, and had never possessed any younger brothers or sisters, or paid much attention to children in general. But with some difficulty she stumbled through Cinderella.

"Oh, yes, I know that; but it's lovely," said the child, at the end, with a sigh of content. "Now I'll tell you one."

And in a high nasal voice, like one repeating a lesson in class, she began upon something which Laura soon discovered to be the life of a saint. She followed the phrases of it with a growing re-

pugnance, till at last the speaker said, with the unction of one sure of her audience:

"And once the good Father went to a hospital to visit some sick people. And as he was hearing a poor sailor's confession, he found out that it was his own brother, whom he had not seen for a long, long time. Now the sailor was very ill, and going to die, and he had been a bad man, and done a great many wicked things. But the good Father did not let the poor man know who he was. He went home and told his Superior that he had found his brother. And the Superior forbade him to go and see his brother again, because, he said, God would take care of him. And the Father was very sad, and the devil tempted him sorely. But he prayed to God, and God helped him to be obedient.

"And a great many years afterwards a poor woman came to see the good Father. And she told him she had seen our Blessed Lady in a vision. And our Blessed Lady had sent her to tell the Father that because he had been so obedient, and had not been to see his brother again, our Lady had prayed our Lord for his brother. And his brother had made a good death, and was saved, all because the good Father had obeyed what his Superior told him."

Laura sprang up. The child, who had expected a kiss and a pious phrase, looked up, startled.

"Wasn't that a pretty story?" she said timidly.

"No; I don't like it at all," said Miss Fountain decidedly. "I wonder they tell you such tales!"

The child stared at her for a moment. Then a sudden veil fell across the clearness of her eyes, which had the preternatural size and brilliance of disease. Her expression changed. It became the slyness of the watching animal, that feels the enemy. She said not another word.

Laura felt a pang of shame, even though she was still vibrating with the repulsion the child's story had excited in her.

"Look!" she said, raising the little one in her arms; "the others are all going into the house. Shall we go too?"

But the child struggled resolutely.

"Let me get down. I can walk." Laura set her down, and the child walked as fast as her lame leg would let her to join the others. Once or twice she looked round furtively at her companion; but she would not take the hand Laura offered her, and she seemed to have wholly lost her tongue.

"Little bigot!" thought Laura, half angry, half amused; "do they catch it from their cradle?"

Presently they found themselves in the tail of a crowd of children and Sisters who were ascending the stairs of a doorway opening on the garden. The

doorway led, as Laura knew, to the corridor of the chapel. She let herself be carried along, irresolute, and presently she found herself within the curtained doorway, mechanically helping the Sisters and Augustina to put the children in their places.

One or two of the older children noticed that the young lady with Mrs. Fountain did not sign herself with holy water, and did not genuflect in passing the altar, and they looked at her with a stealthy surprise. A gentle-looking young Sister came up to her as she was lifting a very small child to a seat.

"Thank you," murmured the Sister. "It is very good of you." But the voice, though so soft, was cold, and Laura at once felt herself the intruder, and withdrew to the back of the crowd.

Yet again, as at her first visit to the chapel, so now, she was too curious, for all her soreness, to go. She must see what they would be at.

"Rosary" passed, and she hardly understood a word. The voice of the Jesuit intoning suggested nothing intelligible to her, and it was some time before she could even make out what the children were saying in their loud-voiced responses. "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death" — was that it? And occasionally an "Our Father" thrown in — all of it gab-

bled as fast as possible, as though the one object of both priest and people were to get through and make an end. Over and over again, without an inflection, or a change — with just the one monotonous repetition and the equally monotonous variation. What a barbarous and foolish business!

Very soon she gave up listening. Her eyes wandered to the frescoes, to the bare altar with its purple covering, to the tall candles sparkling before the tabernacle; and the coloured and scented gloom, pierced with the distant lights, gave her a vague pleasure.

Presently there was a pause. The children settled themselves in their seats with a little clatter. Father Leadham retired, while the Sisters knelt, each bowed profoundly on herself, eyes closed under her coif, hands clasped in front of her.

What were they waiting for? Ah! there was the priest again, but in a changed dress — a white cope of some splendour. The organ, played by one of the Sisters, broke out upon the silence, and the voices of the rest rose suddenly, small and sweet, in a Latin hymn. The priest went to the tabernacle, and set it open. There was a swinging of incense, and the waves of fragrant smoke flowed out upon the chapel, dimming the altar and the figure before it. Laura caught sight for a moment of the young Sister who had spoken to her. She was kneeling and singing,

with sweet, shut eyes; it was clear that she was possessed by a fervour of feeling. Miss Fountain thought to herself, with wonder, "She cannot be much older than I am!"

After the hymn it was the children's turn. What were they singing so lustily to so dancing a tune? Laura bent over to look at the book of a Sister in front of her.

"Virgo prudentissima, Virgo veneranda, Virgo prædicanda ——"

With difficulty she found the place in another book that lay upon a chair beside her. Then for a few minutes she lost herself in a first amazement over that string of epithets and adjectives with which the Catholic Church throughout the world celebrates day by day and Sunday after Sunday the glories of Mary. The gay music, the harsh and eager voices of the children, flowed on, the waves of incense spread throughout the chapel. When she raised her eyes they fell upon Helbeck's dark head in the far distance, above his server's cotta. A quick change crossed her face, transforming it to a passionate contempt.

But of her no one thought — save once. The beautiful "moment" of the ceremony had come. Father Leadham had raised the monstrance, containing the

Host, to give the Benediction. Every Sister, every child, except a few small and tired ones, was bowed in humblest adoration.

Mr. Helbeck, too, was kneeling in the little choir. But his attention wandered. With the exception of his walk with Father Leadham, he had been in church since early morning, and even for him response was temporarily exhausted. His look strayed over the chapel.

It was suddenly arrested. Above the kneeling congregation a distant face showed plainly in the April dusk amid the dimness of incense and painting — a girl's face, delicately white and set — a face of revolt.

"Why is she here?" was his first thought. It came with a rush of annoyance, even resentment. But immediately other thoughts met it: "She is lonely; she is here under my roof; she has lost her father; poor child!"

The last mental phrase was not so much his own as an echo from Father Leadham. In Helbeck's mind it was spoken very much as the priest had spoken it — with that strange tenderness, at once so intimate and so impersonal, which belongs to the spiritual relations of Catholicism. The girl's soul — lonely, hostile, uncared for — appealed to the charity of the believer. At the same time there was something in her defiance, her crude disapproval of

his house and his faith, that stimulated and challenged the man. Conscious for the first time of a new conflict of feeling within himself, he looked steadily towards her across the darkness.

It was as though he had sought and found a way to lift himself above her young pride, her ignorant enmity. For a moment there was a curious exaltation and tyranny in his thought. He dropped his head and prayed for her, the words falling slow and deliberate within his consciousness. And she could not resent it or stop it. It was an aggression before which she was helpless; it struck down the protest of her pale look.

At supper, when the Sisters and their charges had departed, Father Bowles appeared, and never before had Helbeck been so lamentably aware of the absurdities and inferiorities of his parish priest.

The Jesuit, too, was sharply conscious of them, and even Augustina felt that something was amiss. Was it that they were all — except Father Bowles — affected by the presence of the young lady on Helbeck's right — by the cool detachment of her manner, the self-possession that appealed to no one and claimed none of the prerogatives of sex and charm, while every now and then it made itself felt in tacit and resolute opposition to her environment?

"He might leave those things alone!" thought the Jesuit angrily, as he heard Father Bowles giving Mrs. Fountain a gently complacent account of a geological lecture lately delivered in Whinthorpe.

"What I always say, you know, my dear lady, is this: you must show me the evidence! After all, you geologists have done much — you have dug here and there, it is true. But dig all over the world — dig everywhere — lay it all bare. Then you may ask me to listen to you!"

The little round-faced priest looked round the table for support. Laura bit her lip and bent over her plate. Father Leadham turned hastily to Helbeck, and began to discuss with him a recent monograph on the Roman Wall, showing a plentiful and scholarly knowledge of the subject. And presently he drew in the girl opposite, addressing her with a man-of-the-world ease and urbanity which disarmed her. It appeared that he had just come back from mission-work in British Guiana, that he had been in India, and was in all respects a travelled and accomplished person. But the girl did not yield herself, though she listened quite civilly and attentively while he talked.

But again through the Jesuit's easy or polished phrases there broke the purring inanity of Father Bowles.

"Lourdes, my dear lady? Lourdes? How can there be the smallest doubt of the miracles of Lourdes? Why! they keep two doctors on the spot to verify everything!"

The Jesuit's sense of humour was uncomfortably touched. He glanced at Miss Fountain, but could only see that she was gazing steadily out of the window.

As for himself, convert and ex-Fellow of a well-known college, he gave a strong inward assent to the judgment of some of his own leaders, that the older Catholic priests of this country are as a rule lamentably unfit for their work. "Our chance in England is broadening every year," he said to himself. "How are we to seize it with such tools? But all round we want *men*. Oh! for a few more of those who were 'out in forty-five'!"

In the drawing-room after dinner Laura, as usual, entrenched herself in one of the deep oriel windows, behind a heavy table. Augustina showed an anxious curiosity as to the expedition of the morning—as to the Masons and their farm. But Laura would say very little about them.

When the gentlemen came in, Helbeck sent a searching look round the drawing-room. He had the air of one who enters with a purpose.

The beautiful old room lay in a half-light. A lamp at either end could do but little against the shadows that seemed to radiate from the panelled walls and from the deep red hangings of the windows. But the wood fire on the hearth sent out a soft glow, which fastened on the few points of brilliance in the darkness — on the ivory of the fretted ceiling, on the dazzling dress of the Romney, on the gold of Miss Fountain's hair.

Laura looked up with some surprise as Helbeck approached her; then, seeing that he apparently wished to talk, she made a place for him among the old "Books of Beauty" with which she had been bestrewing the seat that ran round the window.

"I trust the pony behaved himself this morning?" he said, as he sat down.

Laura answered politely.

"And you found your way without difficulty?"

"Oh, yes! Your directions were exact."

Inwardly she said to herself, "Does he want to cross-examine me about the Masons?" Then, suddenly, she noticed the scar under his hair — a jagged mark, testifying to a wound of some severity — and it made her uncomfortable. Nay, it seemed in some curious way to put her in the wrong, to shake her self-reliance.

But Helbeck had not come with the intention of talking about the Masons. His avoidance of their name was indeed a pointed one. He drew out her admiration of the daffodils and of the view from Browhead Lane.

"After Easter we must show you something of the high mountains. Augustina tells me you admire the country. The head of Windermere will delight you."

His manner of offering her these civilities was somewhat stiff and conventional — the manner of one who had been brought up among country gentry of the old school, apart from London and the *beau monde*. But it struck Laura that, for the first time, he was speaking to her as a man of his breeding might be expected to speak to a lady visiting his house. There was consideration, and an apparent desire to please. It was as though she had grown all at once into something more in his eyes than Mrs. Fountain's little stepdaughter, who was, no doubt, useful as a nurse and a companion, but radically unwelcome and insignificant none the less.

Inevitably the girl's vanity was soothed. She began to answer more naturally; her smile became more frequent. And gradually an unwonted ease and enjoyment stole over Helbeck also. He talked

with so much animation at last as to draw the attention of another person in the room. Father Leadham, who had been leaning with some languor against the high, carved mantel, while Father Bowles and Augustina babbled beneath him, began to take increasing notice of Miss Fountain, and of her relation to the Bannisdale household. For a girl who had "no training, moral or intellectual," she was showing herself, he thought, possessed of more attraction than might have been expected, for the strict master of the house.

Presently Helbeck came to a pause in what he was saying. He had been describing the country of Wordsworth, and had been dwelling on Grasmere and Rydal Mount, in the tone, indeed, of one who had no vital concern whatever with the Lake poets or their poetry, but still with an evident desire to interest his companion. And following closely on this first effort to make friends with her something further suggested itself.

He hesitated, looked at Laura, and at last said, in a lower voice than he had been using, "I believe your father, Miss Fountain, was a great lover of Wordsworth. Augustina has told me so. You and he were accustomed, were you not, to read much together? Your loss must be very great. You will not wonder, perhaps, that for me there are painful thoughts con-

nected with your father. But I have not been insensible — I have not been without feeling — for my sister — and for you."

He spoke with embarrassment, and a kind of appeal. Laura had been startled by his first words, and while he spoke she sat very pale and upright, staring at him. The hand on her lap shook.

When he ceased she did not answer. She turned her head, and he saw her pretty throat tremble. Then she hastily raised her handkerchief; a struggle passed over the face; she wiped away her tears, and threw back her head, with a sobbing breath and a little shake of the bright hair, like one who reproves herself. But she said nothing; and it was evident that she could say nothing without breaking down.

Deeply touched, Helbeck unconsciously drew a little nearer to her. Changing the subject at once, he began to talk to her of the children and the little festival of the afternoon. An hour before he would have instinctively avoided doing anything of the kind. Now, at last, he ventured to be himself, or something near it. Laura regained her composure, and bent her attention upon him, with a slightly frowning brow. Her mind was divided between the most contradictory impulses and attractions. How had it come about, she asked herself, after a while, that *she* was listening like this to his schemes for his children

and his new orphanage?—she, and not his natural audience, the two priests and Augustina.

She actually heard him describe the efforts made by himself and one or two other Catholics in the county to provide shelter and education for the county's Catholic orphans. He dwelt on the death and disappearance of some of his earlier colleagues, on the urgent need for a new building in the neighbourhood of the county town, and for the enlargement of the "home" he himself had put up some ten years before, on the Whinthorpe Road.

"But, unfortunately, large plans want large means," he added, with a smile, "and I fear it will come to it—has Augustina said anything to you about it?—I fear there is nothing for it, but that our beauteous lady there must provide them."

He nodded towards the picture that gleamed from the opposite wall. Then he added gravely, and with a perfect simplicity:

"It is my last possession of any value."

Several times during the fortnight that she had known him, Laura had heard him speak with a similar simplicity about his personal and pecuniary affairs. That anyone so stately should treat himself and his own worldly concerns with so much *naïveté* had been a source of frequent surprise to her. To what, then, did his dignity, his reserve apply?

Nevertheless, because, childishly, she had already taken a side, as it were, about the picture, his manner, with its apparent indifference, annoyed her. She drew back.

"Yes, Augustina told me. But isn't it cruel? isn't it unkind? A picture like that is alive. It has been here so long — one could hardly feel it belonged only to oneself. It is part of the house, isn't it? — part of the family? Won't other people — people who come after — reproach you?"

Helbeck lifted his shoulders, his dark face half amused, half sad.

"She died a hundred years ago, pretty creature! She has had her turn; so have we — in the pleasure of looking at her."

"But she belongs to you," said the girl insistently. "She is your own kith and kin."

He hesitated, then said, with a new emphasis that answered her own:

"Perhaps there are two sorts of kindred ——"

The girl's cheek flushed.

"And the one you mean may always push out the other? I know, because one of your children told me a story to-day — such a frightful story! — of a saint who would not go to see his dying brother, for obedience' sake. She asked me if I liked it. How could I say I liked it! I told her

it was horrible! I wondered how people could tell her such tales."

Her bearing was again all hostility — a young defiance. She was delighted to confess herself. Her crime, untold, had been pressing upon her conscience, hurting her natural frankness.

Helbeck's face changed. He looked at her attentively, the fine dark eye, under the commanding brow, straight and sparkling.

"You said that to the child?"

"Yes."

Her breast fluttered. She trembled, he saw, with an excitement she could hardly repress.

He, too, felt a novel excitement — the excitement of a strong will provoked. It was clear to him that she meant to provoke him — that her young personality threw itself wantonly across his own. He spoke with a harsh directness.

"You did wrong, I think — quite wrong. Excuse the word, but you have brought me to close quarters. You sowed the seeds of doubt, of revolt, in a child's mind."

"Perhaps," said Laura quickly. "What then?"

She wore her half-wild, half-mocking look. Everything soft and touching had disappeared. The eyes shone under the golden mass of hair; the small mouth was close and scornful. Helbeck looked at her in amazement, his own pulse hurrying.

"What then?" he echoed, with a sternness that astonished himself. "Ask your own feeling. What has a child — a little child under orders — to do with doubt, or revolt? For her — for all of us — doubt is misery."

Laura rose. She forced down her agitation — made herself speak plainly.

"Papa taught me — it was life — and I believe him."

The old clock in the farther corner of the room struck a quarter to ten — the hour of prayers. The two priests on the farther side of the room stood up, and Augustina sheathed her knitting-needles.

Laura turned towards Helbeck and coldly held out her little hand. He touched it, and she crossed the room. "Good-night, Augustina."

She kissed her stepmother, and bowed to the two priests. Father Leadham ceremoniously opened the door for her. Then he and Helbeck, Father Bowles and Augustina followed across the dark hall on their way to the chapel. Laura took her candle, and her light figure could be seen ascending the Jacobean staircase, a slim and charming vision against the shadows of the old house.

Father Leadham followed it with eyes and thoughts. Then he glanced towards Helbeck. An idea — and one that was singularly unwelcome — was forcing its way into the priest's mind.

BOOK II

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

From that night onwards the relations between Helbeck and his sister's stepdaughter took another tone. He no longer went his own way, with no more than a vague consciousness that a curious and difficult girl was in the house; he watched her with increasing interest; he began to taste, as it were, the thorny charm that was her peculiar possession.

Not that he was allowed to see much of the charm. After the conversation of Passion Sunday her manner to him was no less cold and distant than before. Their final collision, on the subject of the child, had, he supposed, undone the effects of his conciliatory words about her father. It must be so, no doubt, since her hostile observation of him and of his friends seemed to be in no whit softened.

That he should be so often conscious of her at this particular time annoyed and troubled him. It was the most sacred moment of the Catholic year. Father Leadham, his old Stonyhurst friend, had come

to spend Passion Week and Holy Week at Bannisdale, as a special favour to one whom the Church justly numbered among the most faithful of her sons; while the Society of Jesus had many links of mutual service and affection, both with the Helbeck family in the past and with the present owner of the Hall. Helbeck, indeed, was of real importance to Catholicism in this particular district of England. It had once abounded in Catholic families, but now hardly one of them remained, and upon Helbeck, with his small resources and dwindling estate, devolved a number of labours which should have been portioned out among a large circle. Only enthusiasm such as his could have sufficed for the task. But, for the Church's sake, he had now remained unmarried some fifteen years. He lived like an ascetic in the great house, with a couple of women servants; he spent all his income — except a fraction — on the good works of a wide district; when larger sums were necessary he was ready, nay, eager, to sell the land necessary to provide them; and whenever he journeyed to other parts of England, or to the Continent, it was generally assumed that he had gone, not as other men go, for pleasure and recreation, but simply that he might pursue some Catholic end, either of money or administration, among the rich and powerful of the faith elsewhere. Meanwhile, it was believed that he had

bequeathed the house and park of Bannisdale to a distant cousin, also a strict Catholic, with the warning that not much else would remain to his heir from the ancient and splendid inheritance of the family.

It was not wonderful, then, that the Jesuits should be glad to do such a man a service; and no service could have been greater in Helbeck's eyes than a visit from a priest of their order during these weeks of emotion and of penance. Every day Mass was said in the little chapel; every evening a small flock gathered to Litany or Benediction. Ordinary life went on as it could in the intervals of prayer and meditation. The house swarmed with priests — with old and infirm priests, many of them from a Jesuit house of retreat on the western coast, not far away, who found in a visit to Bannisdale one of the chief pleasures of their suffering or monotonous lives; while the Superiors of Helbeck's own orphanages were always ready to help the Bannisdale chapel, on days of special sanctity, by sending a party of Sisters and children to provide the singing.

Meanwhile all else was forgotten. As to food, Helbeck and Father Leadham — according to the letters describing her experiences which Laura wrote during these weeks to a Cambridge girl friend — lived upon "a cup of coffee and a banana" per day, and she had endless difficulty in restraining her

charge, Augustina, from doing likewise. For Augustina, indeed — Stephen Fountain's little black-robed widow — her husband was daily receding further and further into a dim and dreadful distance, where she feared and yet wept to think of him. She passed her time in the intoxication of her recovered faith, excited by the people around her, by the services in the chapel, and by her very terrors over her own unholy union, lapse, and restoration. The sound of intoning, the scent of incense, seemed to pervade the house; and at the centre of all brooded that mysterious Presence upon the altar, which drew the passion of Catholic hearts to itself in ever deeper measure as the great days of Holy Week and Easter approached.

Through all this drama of an inventive and exacting faith, Laura Fountain passed like a being from another world, an alien and a mocking spirit. She said nothing, but her eyes were satires. The effect of her presence in the house was felt probably by all its inmates, and by many of its visitors. She did not again express herself — except rarely to Augustina — with the vehemence she had shown to the little lame orphan; she was quite ready to chat and laugh upon occasion with Father Leadham, who had a pleasant wit, and now and then deliberately sought her society; and, owing to the feebleness of Augustina, she, quite unconsciously, established certain house-

hold ways which spoke the woman, and were new to Bannisdale. She filled the drawing-room with daffodils; she made the tea-table by the hall fire a cheerful place for any who might visit it; she flitted about the house in the prettiest and neatest of spring dresses; her hair, her face, her white hands and neck shone amid the shadows of the panelling like jewels in a casket. Everyone was conscious of her — uneasily conscious. She yielded herself to no one, was touched by no one. She stood apart, and through her cold, light ways spoke the world and the spirit that deny — the world at which the Catholic shudders.

At the same time, like everybody else in the house — even the sulky housekeeper — she grew pale and thin from Lenten fare. Mr. Helbeck had of course given orders to Mrs. Denton that his sister and Miss Fountain were to be well provided. But Mrs. Denton was grudging or forgetful; and it amused Laura to see that Augustina was made to eat, while she herself fared with the rest. The viands of whatever sort were generally scanty and ill-cooked; and neither the Squire nor Father Leadham cared anything about the pleasures of the table, in Lent or out of it. Mr. Helbeck hardly noticed what was set before him. Once or twice indeed he woke up to the fact that there was not enough for the ladies and would say an angry word to Mrs. Denton. But on the whole Laura

was able to follow her whim and to try for herself what this Catholic austerity might be like.

"My dear," she wrote to her friend, "one thing you learn from a Catholic Lent is that food matters 'nowt at aw,' as they would say in these parts. You can do just as well without it as with it. Why you should think yourself a saint for not eating it puzzles me. Otherwise — *vive la faim!* And as we are none of us likely to starve ourselves half so much as the poor people of the world, the soldiers, and sailors, and explorers, are always doing, to please themselves or their country, I don't suppose that anybody will come to harm.

"You are to understand, nevertheless, that our austerities are rather unusual. And when anyone comes in from the outside they are concealed as much as possible. . . . The old Helbecks, as far as I can hear, must have been very different people from their modern descendant. They were quite good Catholics, understand. What the Church prescribed they did — but not a fraction beyond. They were like the jolly lazy sort of schoolboy, who *just* does his lesson, but would think himself a fool if he did a word more. Whereas the man who lives here now can never do enough!

"And in general these old Catholic houses — from Augustina's tales — must have been full of

fun and feasting. Well, I can vouch for it, there is no fun in Bannisdale now! It is Mr. Helbeck's personality, I suppose. It makes its own atmosphere. He *can* laugh — I have seen it myself! — but it is an event."

As Lent went on, the mingling of curiosity and cool criticism with which Miss Fountain regarded her surroundings became perhaps more apparent. Father Leadham, in particular, detected the young lady's fasting experiments. He spoke of them to Helbeck as showing a lack of delicacy and good taste. But the Squire, it seemed, was rather inclined to regard them as the whims of a spoilt and wilful child.

This difference of shade in the judgment of the two men may rank as one of the first signs of all that was to come.

Certainly Helbeck had never before felt himself so uncomfortable in his own house as he had done since the arrival of this girl of twenty-one. Nevertheless, as the weeks went on, the half-amused, half-contemptuous embarrassment, which had been the first natural effect of her presence upon the mind of a man so little used to women and their ways, had passed imperceptibly into something else. His reserved and formal manner remained the

same. But Miss Fountain's goings and comings had ceased to be indifferent to him. A silent relation — still unknown to her — had arisen between them.

When he first noticed the fact in himself, it produced a strong, temporary reaction. He reproached himself for a light and unworthy temper. Had his solitary life so weakened him that any new face and personality about him could distract and disturb him, even amid the great thoughts of these solemn days? His heart, his life were in his faith. For more than twenty years, by prayer and meditation, by all the ingenious means that the Catholic Church provides, he had developed the sensibilities of faith; and for the Catholic these sensibilities are centred upon and sustained by the Passion. Now, hour by hour, his Lord was moving to the Cross. He stood perpetually beside the sacred form in the streets of Jerusalem, in Gethsemane, on the steps of the Prætorium. A varied and dramatic ceremonial was always at hand to stimulate the imagination, the penitence, and the devotion of the believer. That anything whatever should break in upon the sacred absorption of these days would have seemed to him beforehand a calamity to be shrunk from — nay, a sin to be repented. He had put aside all business that could be put aside with one object, and one only — to make "a good Easter."

And yet, no sooner did he come back from service in the chapel, or from talk of Church matters with Catholic friends, than he found himself suddenly full of expectation. Was Miss Fountain in the hall, in the garden? or was she gone to those people at Browhead? If she was not in the house — above all, if she was with the Masons — he would find it hard to absorb himself again in the thoughts that had held him before. If she was there, if he found her sitting reading or working by the hall fire, with the dogs at her feet, he seldom indeed went to speak to her. He would go into his library, and force himself to do his business, while Father Leadham talked to her and Augustina. But the library opened on the hall, and he could still hear that voice in the distance. Often, when she caressed the dogs, her tones had the note in them which had startled him on her very first evening under his roof. It was the emergence of something hidden and passionate; and it awoke in himself a strange and troubling echo — the passing surge of an old memory long since thrust down and buried. How fast his youth was going from him! It was fifteen years since a woman's voice, a woman's presence, had mattered anything at all to him.

So it came about that, in some way or other, he

knew, broadly, all that Miss Fountain did, little as he saw of her. It appeared that she had discovered a pony carriage for hire in the little village near the bridge, and once or twice during this fortnight, he learned from Augustina that she had spent the afternoon at Browhead Farm, while the Bannisdale household had been absorbed in some function of the season.

Augustina disliked the news as much as he did, and would throw up her hands in annoyance.

"What *can* she be doing there? They seem the roughest kind of people. But she says the son plays so wonderfully. I believe she plays duets with him. She goes out with the cart full of music."

"Music!" said Helbeck, in frank amazement. "That lout!"

"Well, she says so," said Augustina crossly, as though it were a personal affront. "And what do you think, Alan? She talks of going to a dance up there after Easter — next Thursday, I think."

"At the farm?" Helbeck's tone was incredulous.

"No; at the mill — or somewhere. She says the schoolmaster is giving it, or something of that sort. Of course it's most unsuitable. But what am I to do, Alan? They *are* her relations!"

"At the same time they are not her class," said Helbeck decidedly. "She has been brought up in a

different way, and she cannot behave as though she belonged to them. And a dance, with that young man to look after her! You ought to stop it."

Augustina said dismally that she would try, but her head shook with more feebleness than usual as she went back to her knitting.

Next day Helbeck made a point of finding his sister alone. But she only threw him a deprecatory look.

"I tried, Alan — indeed I did. She says that she wants some amusement — that it will do her good — and that of course her father would have let her go to a dance with his relations. And when I say anything to her about not being quite like them, she fires up. She says she would be ashamed to be thought any better than they, and that Hubert has a great deal more good in him than some people think."

"Hubert!" exclaimed Mr. Helbeck, raising his shoulders in disgust. After a little silence he turned round as he was leaving the room, and said abruptly: "Is she to stay the night at the farm?"

"No! oh, no! She wants to come home. She says she won't be late; she promises not to be late."

"And that young fellow will drive her home, of course?"

"Well, she couldn't drive home alone, Alan, at that time of night. It wouldn't be proper."

Mr. Helbeck smiled rather sourly. "One may doubt where the propriety comes in. Well, she seems determined. We must just arrange it. There is the tower door. Kindly tell her, Augustina, that I will let her have the key of it. And kindly tell her also — as from yourself, of course — that she will be treating us all with courtesy if she does come home at a reasonable hour. We have been a very quiet, prim household all these years, and Mrs. Denton, for all her virtues, has a tongue."

"So she has," said Augustina, sighing. "And she doesn't like Laura — not at all."

Helbeck raised his head quickly. "She does nothing to make Miss Fountain uncomfortable, I trust?"

"Oh — no," said Augustina undecidedly. "Besides, it doesn't matter. Laura has got Ellen under her thumb."

Helbeck's grave countenance showed a gleam of amusement.

"How does Mrs. Denton take that?"

"Oh! she has to bear it. Haven't you seen, Alan, how the girl has brightened up? Laura has shown her how to do her hair; she helped her to make a new frock for Easter; the girl would do anything in the world for her. It's like Bruno. Do you notice, Alan — I really thought you would be angry — that the dog will hardly go with you when Laura's there?"

"Oh! Miss Fountain is a very attractive young lady — to those she likes," said Helbeck dryly.

And on that he went away.

On Good Friday afternoon Laura, in a renewed passion of revolt against all that was going on in the house, went to her room and wrote to her friend. Litanies were being said in the chapel. The distant, melancholy sounds mounted to her now and then. Otherwise the house was wrapped in a mourning silence; and outside, trailing clouds hung round the old walls, making a penitential barrier all about it.

"After this week," wrote Laura to her friend, "I shall always feel kindly towards 'sin' — and the 'world'! How they have been scouted and scourged! And what, I ask you, would any of us do without them? The 'world,' indeed! I seem to hear it go rumbling on, the poor, patient, toiling thing, while these people are praying. It works, and makes it possible for them to pray — while they abuse and revile it.

"And as to 'sin,' and the gloom in which we all live because of it — what on earth does it really mean to any decently taught and brought-up creature? You are greedy, or selfish, or idle, or ill-behaved. Very well, then — nature, or your next-door neighbour, knocks you down for it, and serve you right

Next time you won't do it again, or not so badly, and by degrees you don't even like to think of doing it — you would be 'ashamed,' as people say. It's the process that everybody has to go through, I suppose — being sent into the world the sort of beings we are, and without any leave of ours, altogether. But why make such a wailing and woe and hullabaloo about it! Oh — such a waste of time! Why doesn't Mr. Helbeck go and learn geology? I vow he hasn't an idea what the rocks of his own valley are made of!

"Of course there are the *very* great villains — I don't like to think about them. And the people who are born wrong and sick. But by-and-by we shall have weeded them out, or improved the breed. And why not spend your energies on doing that, instead of singing litanies, and taking ridiculous pains not to eat the things you like?

". . . I shall soon be in disgrace with Augustina and Mr. Helbeck, about the Masons — worse disgrace, that is to say. For now that I have found a pony of my own, I go up there two or three times a week. And really — in spite of all those first experiences I told you of — I like it! Cousin Elizabeth has begun to talk to me; and when I come home, I read the Bible to see what it was all about. And I don't let her say too bad things about Mr. Helbeck

—it wouldn't be quite gentlemanly on my part. And I know most of the Williams story now, both from her and Augustina.

"Imagine, my dear!—a son not allowed to come and see his mother before she died, though she cried for him night and day. He was at a Jesuit school in Wales. They shilly-shallied, and wrote endless letters—and at last they sent him off—the day she died. He arrived three hours too late, and his father shut the door in his face. 'Noa yo' shan't see her,' said the grim old fellow—'an if there's a God above, yo' shan't see her in heaven nayder!' Augustina of course calls it 'holy obedience.'

"The painting in the chapel is really extraordinary. Mr. Helbeck seems to have taught the young man, to begin with. He himself used to paint long ago—not very well, I should think, to judge from the bits of his work still left in the chapel. But at any rate the youth learnt the rudiments from him, and then of course went far beyond his teacher. He was almost two years here, working in the house—tabooed by his family all the time. Then there seems to have been a year in London, when he gave Mr. Helbeck some trouble. I don't know—Augustina is vague. How it was that he joined the Jesuits I can't make out. No doubt Mr. Helbeck induced them to take him. But

why — I ask you — with such a gift? They say he will be here in the summer, and one will have to set one's teeth and shake hands with him.

"Oh, that droning in the chapel — there it is again! I will open the window and let the howl of the rain in to get rid of it. And yet I can't always keep myself away from it. It is all so new — so horribly intimate. Every now and then the music or a prayer or something sends a stab right down to my heart of hearts. — A voice of suffering, of torture — oh! so ghastly, so *real*. Then I come and read papa's note-books for an hour to forget it. I wish he had ever taught me anything — strictly! But *of course* it was my fault.

". . . As to this dance, why shouldn't I go? — just tell me! It is being given by the new schoolmaster, and two or three young farmers, in the big room at the old mill. The schoolmaster is the most tiresomely virtuous young man, and the whole thing is so respectable, it makes me yawn to think of it. Polly implores me to go, and I like Polly. (Very soon she'll let me halve her fringe!) I gave Hubert a preliminary snub, and now he doesn't dare implore me to go. But that is all the more engaging. I *don't* flirt with him! — heavens! — unless you call bear-taming flirtation. But one can't see his music running to waste in such a bog of tantrums and

tempers. I must try my hand. And as he is my cousin I can put up with him."

After High Mass on Easter Sunday Helbeck walked home from Whinthorpe alone, as his companion Father Leadham had an engagement in the town.

Through the greater part of Holy Week the skies had been as grey and penitential as the season. The fells and the river flats had been scourged at night with torrents of rain and wind, and in the pale mornings any passing promise of sun had been drowned again before the day was high. The roofs and eaves, the small panes of the old house, trickled and shone with rain; and at night the wind tore through the gorge of the river with great boomings and onslaughts from the west. But with Easter eve there had come appeasement — a quiet dying of the long storm. And as Helbeck made his way along the river on Easter morning, mountain and flood, grass and tree, were in a glory of recovered sun. The distant fells were drawn upon the sky in the heavenliest brushings of blue and purple; the river thundered over its falls and weirs in a foamy splendour; and the deer were feeding with a new zest amid the fast-greening grass.

He stopped a moment to rest upon his stick and

look about him. Something in his own movement reminded him of another solitary walk some five weeks before. And at the same instant he perceived a small figure sitting on a stone seat in front of him. It was Miss Fountain. She had a book on her knee, and the two dogs were beside her. Her white dress and hat seemed to make the centre of a whole landscape. The river bent inward in a great sweep at her feet, the crag rose behind her, and the great prospect beyond the river of dale and wood, of scar and cloud, seemed spread there for her eyes alone. A strange fancy seized on Helbeck. This was his world — his world by inheritance and by love. Five weeks before he had walked about it as a solitary. And now this figure sat enthroned, as it were, at the heart of it. He roughly shook the fancy off and walked on.

Miss Fountain greeted him with her usual detachment. He stood a minute or two irresolute, then threw himself on the slope in front of her.

"Bruno will hardly look at his master now," he said to her pleasantly, pointing to the dog's attitude as it lay with its nose upon the hem of her dress.

Laura closed her book in some annoyance. He usually returned by the other side of the river, and she was not grateful to him for his breach of habit. Why had he been meddling in her affairs? She perfectly understood why Augustina had been making

herself so difficult about the dance, and about the Masons in general. Let him keep his proprieties to himself. She, Laura, had nothing to do with them. She was hardly his guest — still less his ward. She had come to Bannisdale against her will, simply and solely as Augustina's nurse. In return, let Mr. Helbeck leave her alone to enjoy her plebeian relations as she pleased.

Nevertheless, of course she must be civil; and civil she intermittently tried to be. She answered his remark about Bruno by a caress to the dog that brought him to lay his muzzle against her knee.

"Do you mind? Some people do mind. I can easily drive him away."

"Oh, no! I reckon on recovering him — some day," he said, with a frank smile.

Laura flushed.

"Very soon, I should think. Have you noticed, Mr. Helbeck, how much better Augustina is already? I believe that by the end of the summer, at least, she will be able to do without me. And she tells me that the Superior at the orphanage has a girl to recommend her as a companion when I go."

"Rather officious of the Reverend Mother, I think," said Helbeck sharply. He paused a moment, then added with some emphasis, "Don't imagine, Miss Fountain, that anybody else can do for my sister what you do."

"Ah! but — well — one must live one's life — mustn't one, Fricka?" — Fricka was by this time jealously pawing her dress. "I want to work at my music — hard — this winter."

"And I fear that Bannisdale is not a very gay place for a young lady visitor?"

He smiled. And so did she; though his tone, with its shade of proud humility, embarrassed her.

"It is as beautiful as a dream!" she said, with sudden energy, throwing up her little hand. And he turned to look, as she was looking, at the river and the woods.

"You feel the beauty of it so much?" he asked her, wondering. His own strong feeling for his native place was all a matter of old habit and association. The flash of wild pleasure in her face astounded him. There was in it that fiery, tameless something that was the girl's distinguishing mark, her very soul and self. Was it beginning to speak from her blood to his?

She nodded, then laughed.

"But, of course, it isn't my business to live here. I have a great friend — a Cambridge girl — and we have arranged it all. We are to live together, and travel a great deal, and work at music."

"That is what young ladies do nowadays, I understand."

"And why not?"

He lifted his shoulders, as though to decline the answer, and was silent — so silent that she was forced at last to take the field.

"Don't you approve of 'new women,' Mr. Helbeck? Oh! I wish I were a new woman," she threw out defiantly. "But I'm not good enough — I don't know anything."

"I wasn't thinking of them," he said simply. "I was thinking of the life that women used to live here, in this place, in the past — of my mother and my grandmother."

She could not help a stir of interest. What might the Catholic women of Bannisdale have been like? She looked along the path that led downward to the house, and seemed to see their figures upon it — not short and sickly like Augustina, but with the morning in their eyes and on their white brows, like the Romney lady. Helbeck's thoughts meanwhile were peopled by the more solid forms of memory.

"You remember the picture?" he said at last, breaking the silence. "The husband of that lady was a boor and a gambler. He soon broke her heart. But her children consoled her to some extent, especially the daughters, several of whom became nuns. The poor wife came from a large Lancashire family, but she hardly saw her relations after her marriage;

she was ashamed of her husband's failings and of their growing poverty. She became very shy and solitary, and very devout. These rock-seats along the river were placed by her. It is said that she used in summer to spend long hours on that very seat where you are sitting, doing needlework, or reading the Little Office of the Virgin, at the hours when her daughters in their French convent would be saying their office in chapel. She died before her husband, a very meek, broken creature. I have a little book of her meditations, that she wrote out by the wish of her confessor.

"Then my grandmother — ah! well, that is too long a story. She was a Frenchwoman — we have some of her books in my study. She never got on with England and English people — and at last, after her husband's death, she never went outside the house and park. My father owed much of his shyness and oddity to her bringing up. When she felt herself dying she went over to her family to die at Nantes. She is buried there; and my father was sent to the Jesuit school at Nantes for a long time. Then my mother — But I mustn't bore you with these family tales."

He turned to look at his listener. Laura was by this time half embarrassed, half touched.

"I should like to hear about your mother," she said rather stiffly.

"You may talk to me if you like, but don't, pray, presume upon it!"—that was what her manner said.

Helbeck smiled a little, unseen, under his black moustache.

"My mother was a great lover of books—the only Helbeck, I think, that ever read anything. She was a friend and correspondent of Cardinal Wiseman's—and she tried to make a family history out of the papers here. But in her later years she was twisted and crippled by rheumatic gout—her poor fingers could not turn the pages. I used to help her sometimes; but we none of us shared her tastes. She was a very happy person, however."

Happy! Why? Laura felt a fresh prick of irritation as he paused. Was she never to escape—not even here, in the April sun, beside the river bank! For, of course, what all this meant was that the really virtuous and admirable woman does not roam the world in search of art and friendship; she makes herself happy at home with religion and rheumatic gout.

But Helbeck resumed. And instantly it struck her that he had dropped a sentence, and was taking up the thread further on.

"But there was no priest in the house then, for the Society could not spare us one; and very few services in the chapel. Through all her young days nothing could be poorer or raggeder than English Catholicism.

There was no church at Whinthorpe. Sunday after Sunday my father used to read the prayers in the chapel, which was half a lumber-room. I often think no Dissent could have been barer; but we heard Mass when we could, and that was enough for us. One of the priests from Stonyhurst came when she died. This is her little missal."

He raised it from the grass — a small volume bound in faded morocco — but he did not offer to show it to Miss Fountain, and she felt no inclination to ask for it.

"Why did they live so much alone?" she asked him, with a little frown. "I suppose there were always neighbours?"

He shook his head.

"A difference that has law and education besides religion behind it, goes deep. Times are changed, but it goes deep still."

There was a pause. Then she looked at him with a whimsical lifting of her brows.

"Bannisdale was not amusing?" she said.

He laughed good-humouredly. "Not for a woman, certainly. For a man, yes. There was plenty of rough sport and card-playing, and a good deal of drinking. The men were full of character, often full of ability. But there was no outlet — and a wretched education. My great-grandfather might have been

saved by a commission in the army. But the law forbade it him. So they lived to themselves and by themselves; they didn't choose to live with their Protestant neighbours — who had made them outlaws and inferiors! And, of course, they sank in manners and refinement. You may see the results in all the minor Catholic families to this day — that is, the old families. The few great houses that remained faithful escaped many of the drawbacks of the position. The smaller ones suffered, and succumbed. But they had their compensations!"

As he spoke he rose from the grass, and the dogs, springing up, barked joyously about him.

"Augustina will be waiting dinner for us, I think."

Laura, who had meant to stay behind, saw that she was expected to walk home with him. She rose unwillingly, and moved on beside him.

"Their compensations?" That meant the Mass and all the rest of this tyrannous clinging religion. What did it honestly mean to Mr. Helbeck — to anybody? She remembered her father's rough laugh. "There are twelve hundred men, my dear, belonging to the Athenæum Club. I give you the bishops. After them, what do you suppose religion has to say to the rest of the twelve hundred? How many of them ever give a thought to it?"

She raised her eyes, furtively, to Helbeck's face.

In spite of its melancholy lines, she had lately begun to see that its fundamental expression was a contented one. That, no doubt, came from the "compensations." But to-day there was more. She was positively startled by his look of happiness as he strode silently along beside her. It was all the more striking because of the plain traces left upon him by Lenten fatigue and "mortification."

It was Easter day, and she supposed he had come from Communion.

A little shiver passed through her, caused by the recollection of words she had heard, acts of which she had been a witness, in the chapel during the foregoing week — words and acts of emotion, of abandonment — love crying to love. A momentary thirst seized her — an instant's sense of privation, of longing, gone almost as soon as it had come.

Helbeck turned to her.

"So this dance you are going to is on Thursday?" he said pleasantly.

She came to herself in a moment.

"Yes, on Thursday, at eight. I shall go early. I have engaged a fly to take me to the farm — thank you! — and my cousins will see me home. I am obliged to you for the key. It will save my giving any trouble."

"If you did we should not grudge it," he said quietly.

She was silent for a few more steps, then she said:

"I quite understand, Mr. Helbeck, that you do not approve of my going. But I must judge for myself. The Masons are my own people. I am sorry they should have — Well — I don't understand — but it seems you have reason to think badly of them."

"Not of *them*," he said with emphasis.

"Of my cousin Hubert, then?"

He made no answer. She coloured angrily, then broke out, her words tumbling childishly over one another:

"There are a great many things said of Hubert that I don't believe he deserves! He has a great many good tastes — his music is wonderful. At any rate, he is my cousin; they are papa's only relations in the world. He would have been kind to Hubert; and he would have despised me if I turned my back on them because I was staying in a grand house with grand people!"

"Grand people!" said Helbeck, raising his eyebrows. "But I am sorry I led you to say these things, Miss Fountain. Excuse me — may I open this gate for you?"

She reached her own room as quickly as possible, and dropped upon the chair beside her dressing-table in a whirl of angry feeling. A small and heated face looked out upon her from the glass. But after the

first instinctive moment she took no notice of it. With the mind's eye she still saw the figure she had just parted from, the noble poise of the head, thrown back on the broad shoulders, the black and greys of the hair, the clear penetrating glance — all the slight signs of age and austerity that had begun to filch away the Squire's youth. It was at least ten minutes before she could free herself enough from the unwelcome memories of her walk to find a vindictive pleasure in running hastily to look at her one white dress — all she had to wear at the Browhead dance.

On Thursday afternoon Helbeck was fishing in the park. The sea-trout were coming up, the day was soft, and he had done well. But just as the evening rise was beginning he put up his rod and went home. Father Leadham had taken his departure. Augustina, Miss Fountain, and he were again alone in the house.

He went into his study, and left the door open, while he busied himself with some writing.

Presently Augustina put her head in. She looked dishevelled, and rather pinker than usual, as always happened when there was the smallest disturbance of her routine.

"Laura has just gone up to dress, Alan. Is it fine?"

"There is no rain," he said, without turning his

head. "Don't shut the door, please. This fire is oppressive."

She went away, and he wrote on a little while — then listened. He heard hurrying feet and movements overhead, and presently a door opened hastily, and a voice exclaimed, "Just two or three, you know, Ellen — from that corner under the kitchen-window! Run, there's a good girl!"

And there was a clattering noise as Ellen ran down the front stairs, and then flew along the corridor to the garden-door.

In a minute she was back again, and as she passed his room Helbeck saw that she was carrying a bunch of white narcissus.

Then more sounds of laughter and chatter overhead. At last Augustina hurried down and looked in upon him again, flurried and smiling.

"Alan, you really must see her. She looks so pretty."

"I am afraid I'm busy," he said, still writing. And she retired disappointed, careful, however, to follow his wishes about the door.

"Augustina, hold Bruno!" cried a light voice suddenly. "If he jumps on me I'm done for!"

A swish of soft skirts and she was there — in the hall. Helbeck could see her quite plainly as she stood by the oak table in her white dress. There was

just room at the throat of it for a pearl necklace, and at the wrists for some thin gold bracelets. The narcissus were in her hair, which she had coiled and looped in a wonderful way, so that Helbeck's eyes were dazzled by its colour and abundance, and by the whiteness of the slender neck below it. She meanwhile was quite unconscious of his neighbourhood, and he saw that she was all in a happy flutter, hastily putting on her gloves, and chattering alternately to Augustina and to the transformed Ellen, who stood in speechless admiration behind her, holding a cloak.

"There, Ellen, that'll do. You're a darling — and the flowers are perfect. Run now, and tell Mrs. Denton that I didn't keep you more than twenty minutes. Oh, yes, Augustina, I'm quite warm. I can't choke, dear, even to please you. There now — here goes! If you do lock me out, there's a corner under the bridge, quite snug. My dress will mind — I shan't. Good-night. My compliments to Mr. Helbeck."

Then a hasty kiss to Augustina and she was gone.

Helbeck went out into the hall. Augustina was standing on the steps, watching the departing fly. At the sight of her brother she turned back to him, her poor little face aglow.

"She did look so nice, Alan! I wish she had gone to a proper dance, and not to these odd farmers and

people. Why, they'll all go in their high dresses, and think her stuck-up."

"I assure you I never saw anything so smart as Miss Mason at the hunt ball," said Helbeck. "Did you give her the key, Augustina? But I shall probably sit up. There are some Easter accounts that must be done."

The old clock in the hall struck one. Helbeck was sitting in his familiar chair before the log fire, which he had just replenished. In one hand was a life of St. Philip Neri, the other played absently with Bruno's ears. In truth he was not reading but listening.

Suddenly there was a sound. He turned his head, and saw that the door leading from the hall to the tower staircase, and thence to the kitchen regions, had been opened.

"Who's there?" he said in astonishment.

Mrs. Denton appeared.

"You, Denton! What are you up for at this time?"

"I came to see if the yoong lady had coom back," she said in a low voice, and with her most forbidding manner. "It's late, and I heard nowt."

"Late? Not at all! Go to bed, Denton, at once; Miss Fountain will be here directly."

"I'm not sleepy; I can wait for her," said the

housekeeper, advancing a step or two into the hall. "You mun be tired, sir, and should take your rest."

"I'm not the least tired, thank you. Good-night. Let me recommend you to go to bed as quickly as possible."

Mrs. Denton lingered for a moment, as though in hesitation, then went with a sulky unwillingness that was very evident to her master.

Helbeck laid down his book on his knee with a little laugh.

"She would have liked to get in a scolding, but we won't give her the chance."

The reverie that followed was not a very pleasant one. He seemed to see Miss Fountain in the large rustic room, with a bevy of young men about her — young fellows in Sunday coats, with shiny hair and limbs bursting out of their ill-fitting clothes. There would be loud talking and laughter, rough jokes that would make her wince, compliments that would disgust her — they not knowing how to take her, nor she them. She would be wholly out of her place — a butt for impertinence — perhaps worse. And there would be a certain sense of dragging a lady from her sphere — of making free with the old house and the old family.

He thought of it with disgust. He was an aristocrat to his fingers' ends.

But how could it have been helped? And when he remembered her as she had stood there in the hall, so young and pretty, so eager for her pleasure, he said to himself with sudden heartiness:

"Nonsense! I hope the child has enjoyed herself." It was the first time that, even in his least formal thoughts, he had applied such a word to her.

Silence again. The wind breathed gently round the house. He could hear the river rushing.

Once he thought there was a sound of wheels and he went to the outer door, but there was nothing. Overhead the stars shone, and along the track of the river lay a white mist.

As he was turning back to the hall, however, he heard voices from the mist — a loud man's voice, then a little cry as of some one in fright or anger, then a song. The rollicking tune of it shouted into the night, into the stately stillness that surrounded the old house, had the abruptest, unseemliest effect.

Helbeck ran down the steps. A dog-cart with lights approached the gateway in the low stone enclosure before the house. It shot through so fast and so awkwardly as to graze the inner post. There was another little cry. Then, with various lurches and lunges, the cart drove round the gravel, and brought up somewhere near the steps.

Hubert Mason jumped down.

"Who's that? Mr. Helbeck? O Lord! glad to see yer, I'm sure! There's that little silly — she's been making such a fuss all the way — thought I was going to upset her into the river, I do believe. She would try and get at the reins, though I told her it was the worst thing to do, whatever — to be interfering with the driver. Lord! I thought she'd have used the whip to me!"

And Mason stood beside the shafts, with his arms on the side, laughing loudly and looking at Laura.

"Stand out of the way, sir!" said Helbeck sternly, "and let me help Miss Fountain."

"Oh! I say! — Come now, I'm not going to stand you coming it over me twice in the same sort — not I," cried the young man with a violent change of tone. "*You* get out of the way, d—mn you! I brought Miss Fountain home, and she's my cousin — so there! — not yours."

"Hubert, go away at once!" said Laura's shaking but imperious voice. "I prefer that Mr. Helbeck should help me."

She had risen and was clinging to the rail of the dog-cart, while her face drooped so that Helbeck could not see it.

Mason stepped back with another oath, caught his foot in the reins, which he had carelessly left hanging, and fell on his knees on the gravel.

"No matter," said Helbeck, seeing that Laura paused in terror. "Give me your hand, Miss Fountain."

She slipped on the step in the darkness, and Helbeck caught her and set her on her feet.

"Go in, please. I will look after him."

She ran up the steps, then turned to look.

Mason, still swearing and muttering, had some difficulty in getting up. Helbeck stood by till he had risen and disentangled the reins.

"If you don't drive carefully down the park in the fog you'll come to harm," he said, shortly, as Mason mounted to his seat.

"That's none of your business," said Mason sulkily. "I brought my cousin all right — I suppose I can take myself. Now, come up, will you!"

He struck the pony savagely on the back with the reins. The tired animal started forward; the cart swayed again from side to side. Helbeck held his breath as it passed the gate-posts; but it shaved through, and soon nothing but the gallop of retreating hoofs could be heard through the night.

He mounted the steps, and shut and barred the outer door. When he entered the hall, Laura was sitting by the oak table, one hand supporting and hiding her face, the other hanging listlessly beside her.

She struggled to her feet as he came in. The hood of her blue cloak had fallen backwards, and her hair was in confusion round her face and neck. Her cheeks were very white, and there were tears in her eyes. She had never seemed to him so small, so childish, or so lovely.

He took no notice of her agitation or of her efforts to speak. He went to a tray of wine and biscuits that had been left by his orders on a side-table, and poured out some wine.

"No, I don't want it," she said, waving it away. "I don't know what to say ——"

"You would do best to take it," he said, interrupting her.

His quiet insistence overcame her, and she drank it. It gave her back her voice and a little colour. She bit her lip, and looked after Helbeck as he walked away to the farther end of the hall to light a candle for her.

"Mr. Helbeck," she began as he came near. Then she gathered force. "You must — you ought to let me apologise."

"For what? I am afraid you had a disagreeable and dangerous drive home. Would you like me to wake one of the servants — Ellen, perhaps — and tell her to come to you?"

"Oh! you won't let me say what I ought to say," she

exclaimed in despair. "That my cousin should have behaved like this — should have insulted you ——"

"No! no!" he said with some peremptoriness. "Your cousin insulted you by daring to drive with you in such a state. That is all that matters to me — or should, I think, matter to you. Will you have your candle, and shall I call anyone?"

She shook her head and moved towards the staircase, he accompanying her. When he saw how feebly she walked, he was on the point of asking her to take his arm and let him help her to her room; but he refrained.

At the foot of the stairs she paused. Her "good-night" died in her throat as she offered her hand. Her dejection, her girlish shame, made her inexpressibly attractive to him; it was the first time he had ever seen her with all her arms thrown down. But he said nothing. He bade her good-night with a cheerful courtesy, and, returning to the hall fire, he stood beside it till he heard the distant shutting of her door.

Then he sank back into his chair and sat motionless, with knitted brows, for nearly an hour, staring into the caverns of the fire.

CHAPTER II

Laura awoke very early the following morning, but though the sun was bright outside, it brought no gaiety to her. The night before she had hurried her undressing, that she might bury herself in her pillow as quickly as possible, and force sleep to come to her. It was her natural instinct in the face of pain or humiliation. To escape from it by any summary method was always her first thought. "I will, I must go to sleep!" she had said to herself, in a miserable fury with herself and fate; and by the help of an intense exhaustion sleep came.

But in the morning she could do herself no more violence. Memory took its course, and a very disquieting course it was. She sat up in bed, with her hands round her knees, thinking not only of all the wretched and untoward incidents connected with the ball, but of the whole three weeks that had gone before it. What had she been doing, how had she been behaving, that this odious youth should have dared to treat her in such a way?

Fricka jumped up beside her, and Laura held

the dog's nose against her cheek for comfort, while she confessed herself. Oh! what a fool she had been. Why, pray, had she been paying all these visits to the farm, and spending all these hours in this young fellow's company? Her quick intelligence unravelled all the doubtful skein. Yearning towards her kindred? — yes, there had been something of that. Recoil from the Bannisdale ways, an angry eagerness to scout them and fly them? — yes, that there had always been in plenty. But she dived deeper into her self-disgust, and brought up the real bottom truth, disagreeable and hateful as it was: mere excitement about a young man, as a young man — mere love of power over a great hulking fellow whom other people found unmanageable! Aye, there it was, in spite of all the glosses she had put upon it in her letters to Molly Friedland. All through, she had known perfectly well that Hubert Mason was not her equal; that on a number of subjects he had vulgar habits and vulgar ideas; that he often expressed his admiration for her in a way she ought to have resented. There were whole sides of him, indeed, that she shrank from exploring — that she wanted, nay, was determined, to know nothing about.

On the other hand, her young daring, for want of any better prey, had taken pleasure from the beginning in bringing him under her yoke. With her

second visit to the farm she saw that she could make him her slave — that she had only to show him a little flattery, a little encouragement, and he would be as submissive and obedient to her as he was truculent and ill-tempered towards the rest of the world. And her vanity had actually plumed itself on so poor a prey! One excuse — yes, there was the one excuse! With her he had shown the side that she alone of his kindred could appreciate. But for the fear of Cousin Elizabeth she could have kept him hanging over the piano hour after hour while she played, in a passion of delight. Here was common ground. Nay, in native power he was her superior, though she, with her better musical training, could help and correct him in a thousand ways. She had the woman's passion for influence; and he seemed like wax in her hands. Why not help him to education and refinement, to the cultivation of the best that was in him? She would persuade Cousin Elizabeth — alter and amend his life for him — and Mr. Helbeck should see that there were better ways of dealing with people than by looking down upon them and despising them.

And now the very thought of these vain and silly dreams set her face aflame. Power over him? Let her only remember the humiliations, through which she had been dragged! All the dance came back upon her — the strange people, the strange young men, the

strange, raftered room, with the noise of the mill-stream and the weir vibrating through it, and mingling with the chatter of the fiddles. But she had been determined to enjoy it, to give herself no airs, to forget with all her might that she was anyway different from these dale-folk, whose blood was hers. And with the older people all had been easy. With the elderly women especially, in their dark gowns and large Sunday collars, she had felt herself at home; again and again she had put herself under their wing, while in their silent way they turned their shrewd motherly eyes upon her, and took stock of her and every detail of her dress. And the old men, with their patriarchal manners and their broad speech — it had been all sweet and pleasant to her. "Noo, Miss, they tell ma as yo' are Stephen Fountain's dowter. An I mut meäk bold ter cum an speak to thee, for a knew 'un when he was a lile lad." Or "Yo'll gee ma your hand, Miss Fountain, for we're pleased and proud to git yo' here. Yer fadther an mea gaed to skule togedther. My worrd, but he was parlish cliver! An I daursay as you teäk afther him." Kind folk! with all the signs of their hard and simple life about them.

But the young men — how she had hated them! — whether they were shy, or whether they were bold; whether they romped with their sweethearts, and laughed at their own jokes like bulls of Bashan, or

whether they wore their best clothes as though the garments burnt them, and danced the polka in a perspiring and anguished silence! No; she was not of *their* class, thank Heaven! She never wished to be. One man had asked her to put a pin in his collar; another had spilt a cup of coffee over her white dress; a third had confided to her that his young lady was "that luvin" to him in public, he had been fair obliged to bid her "keep hersel to hersel afore foak." The only partner with whom it had given her the smallest pleasure to dance had been the schoolmaster and principal host of the evening, a tall, sickly young man, who wore spectacles and talked through his nose. But he talked of things she understood, and he danced tolerably. Alas! there had come the rub. Hubert Mason had stood sentinel beside her during the early part of the evening. He had assumed the proudest and most exclusive airs with regard to her, and his chief aim seemed to be to impress upon her the prestige he enjoyed among his fellows as a football player and an athlete. In the end his patronage and his boasting had become insupportable to a girl of any spirit. And his dancing! It seemed to her that he held her before him like a shield, and then charged the room with her. She had found herself the centre of all eyes, her pretty dress torn, her hair about her ears. So that she had shaken him off — with too

much impatience, no doubt, and too little consideration for the touchiness of his temper. And then, what stormy looks, what mutterings, what disappearances into the refreshment-room — and, finally, what fierce jealousy of the schoolmaster! Laura awoke at last to the disagreeable fact that she had to drive home with him — and he had already made her ridiculous. Even Polly — the bedizened Polly — looked grave, and there had been angry conferences between her and her brother.

Then came the departure, Laura by this time full of terrors, but not knowing what to do, nor how else she was to get home. And, oh! that grinning band of youths round the door — Mason's triumphant leap into the cart and boisterous farewells to his friends — and that first perilous moment, when the pony had almost backed into the mill stream, and was only set right again by half a dozen stalwart arms, amid the laughter of the street!

As for the wild drive through the dark, she shivered again, half with anger, half with terror, as she thought of it. How had they ever got home? She could not tell. He was drunk, of course. He seemed to her to have driven into everything and over everything, abusing the schoolmaster and Mr. Helbeck and his mother all the time, and turning upon her when she answered him, or showed any terror of what might

happen to them, now with fury, and now with attempts at love-making which it had taken all her power over him to quell.

Their rush up the park had been like the ride of the wild horseman. Every moment she had expected to be in the river. And with the approach of the house he had grown wilder and more unmanageable than before. "Dang it! let's wake up the old Papist!" he had said to her when she had tried to stop his singing. "What harm'll it do?"

As for the shame of their arrival, the very thought of Mr. Helbeck standing silent on the steps as they approached, of Hubert's behaviour, of her host's manner to her in the hall, made her shut her eyes and hide her red face against Fricka for sympathy. How was she ever to meet Mr. Helbeck again, to hold her own against him any more!

An hour later Laura, very carefully dressed, and holding herself very erect, entered Augustina's room.

"Oh, Laura!" cried Mrs. Fountain, as the door opened. She was very flushed, and she stared from her bed at her stepdaughter in an agitated silence.

Laura stopped short.

"Well, what is it, Augustina? What have you heard?"

"Laura! how *can* you do such things!"

And Augustina, who already had her breakfast beside her, raised her handkerchief to her eyes and began to cry. Laura threw up her head and walked away to a far window, where she turned and confronted Mrs. Fountain.

"Well, he has been quick in telling you," she said, in a low but fierce voice.

"He? What do you mean? My brother? As if he had said a word! I don't believe he ever would. But Mrs. Denton heard it all."

"Mrs. Denton?" said Laura. "*Mrs. Denton?* What on earth had she to do with it?"

"She heard you drive up. You know her room looks on the front."

"And she listened? sly old creature!" said Laura, recovering herself. "Well, it can't be helped. If she heard, she heard, and whatever I may feel, I'm not going to apologise to Mrs. Denton."

"But, Laura — Laura — was he ——"

Augustina could not finish the odious question.

"I suppose he was," said Laura bitterly. "It seems to be the natural thing for young men of that sort."

"Laura, do come here."

Laura came unwillingly, and Augustina took her hands and looked up at her.

"And, Laura, he was abominably rude to Alan!"

"Yes, he was, and I'm very sorry," said the girl slowly. "But it can't be helped, and it's no good making yourself miserable, Augustina."

"Miserable? I? It's you, Laura, who look miserable. I never saw you look so white and dragged. You must never, never see him again."

The girl's obstinacy awoke in a moment.

"I don't know that I shall promise that, Augustina."

"Oh, Laura! as if you could wish to," said Augustina, in tears.

"I can't give up my father's people," said the girl stiffly. "But he shall never annoy Mr. Helbeck again, I promise you that, Augustina."

"Oh! you did look so nice, Laura, and your dress was so pretty!"

Laura laughed, rather grimly.

"There's not much of it left this morning," she said. "However, as one of the gentlemen who kindly helped to ruin it said last night, 'Lor, bless yer, it'll wesh!'"

After breakfast Laura found herself in the drawing-room, looking through an open window at the spring green in a very strained and irritable mood.

"I would not begin if I could not go on," she said to herself with disdain. But her lip trembled.

So Mr. Helbeck had taken offence, after all. Hardly a word at breakfast, except such as the briefest, barest civility required. And he was going away, it appeared, for three days, perhaps a week, on business. If he had given her the slightest opening, she had meant to master her pride sufficiently to renew her apologies and ask his advice, subject, of course, to her own final judgment as to what kindred and kindness might require of her. But he had given her no opening, and the subject was not, apparently, to be renewed between them.

She might have asked him, too, to curb Mrs. Denton's tongue. But no, it was not to be. Very well. The girl drew her small frame together and prepared, as no one thought for or befriended her, to think for and befriend herself.

She passed the next few days in some depression. Mr. Helbeck was absent. Augustina was very ailing and querulous, and Laura was made to feel that it was her fault. Not a word of regret or apology came from Browhead Farm.

Meanwhile Mrs. Denton had apparently made her niece understand that there was to be no more dallying with Miss Fountain. Whenever she and Laura met, Ellen lowered her head and ran. Laura found that the girl was not allowed to wait upon her personally any more. Meanwhile the housekeeper

herself passed Miss Fountain with a manner and a silence which were in themselves an insult.

And two days after Helbeck's departure, Laura was crossing the hall towards tea-time, when she saw Mrs. Denton admitting one of the Sisters from the orphanage. It was the Reverend Mother herself, the portly shrewd-faced woman who had wished Mr. Helbeck a good wife. Laura passed her, and the nun saluted her coldly. "Dear me! — you shall have Augustina to yourself, my good friend," thought Miss Fountain. "Don't be afraid." And she turned into the garden.

An hour later she came back. As she opened the door in the old wall she saw the Sister on the steps, talking with Mrs. Denton. At sight of her they parted. The nun drew her long black cloak about her, ran down the steps, and hurried away.

And indoors, Laura could not imagine what had happened to her stepmother. Augustina was clearly excited, yet she would say nothing. Her restlessness was incessant, and at intervals there were furtive tears. Once or twice she looked at Laura with the most tragic eyes, but as soon as Laura approached her she would hastily bury herself in her newspaper, or begin counting the stitches of her knitting.

At last, after luncheon, Mrs. Fountain suddenly

threw down her work with a sigh that shook her small person from top to toe.

"I wish I knew what was wrong with you," said Laura, coming up behind her, and dropping a pair of soft hands on her shoulders. "Shall I get you your new tonic?"

"No!" said Augustina pettishly; then, with a rush of words that she could not repress:

"Laura, you must—you positively must give up that young man."

Laura came round and seated herself on the fender stool in front of her stepmother.

"Oh! so that's it. Has anybody else been gossiping?"

"I do wish you wouldn't—you wouldn't take things so coolly!" cried Augustina. "I tell you, the least trifle is enough to do a young girl of your age harm. Your father would have been so annoyed."

"I don't think so," said Laura quietly. "But who is it now? The Reverend Mother?"

Augustina hesitated. She had been recommended to keep things to herself. But she had no will to set against Laura's, and she was, in fact, bursting with suppressed remonstrance.

"It doesn't matter, my dear. One never knows where a story of that kind will go to. That's just what girls don't remember."

"Who told a story, and what? I didn't see the Reverend Mother at the dance."

"Laura! But you never thought, my dear — you never knew — that there was a cousin of Father Bowles' there — the man who keeps that little Catholic shop in Market Street. That's what comes, you see, of going to parties with people beneath you."

"Oh! a cousin of Father Bowles was there?" said Laura slowly. "Well, did he make a pretty tale?"

"Laura! you are the most provoking — You don't the least understand what people think. How could you go with him when everybody remonstrated?"

"Nobody remonstrated," said the girl sharply.

"His sister begged you not to go."

"His sister did nothing of the kind. She was staying the night in the village, and there was literally nothing for me to do but come home with Hubert or to throw myself on some stranger."

"And such stories as one hears about this dreadful young man!" cried Augustina.

"I dare say. There are always stories."

"I couldn't even tell you what they are about!" said Augustina. "Your father would *certainly* have forbidden it altogether."

There was a silence. Laura held her head as high as ever. She was, in fact, in a fever of contradiction and resentment, and the interference of people like Mrs. Denton and the Sisters was fast bringing about Mason's forgiveness. Naturally, she was likely to hear the worst of him in that house. What Helbeck, or what dependent on a Helbeck, would give him the benefit of any doubt?

Augustina knitted with all her might for a few minutes, and then looked up.

"Don't you think," she said, with a timid change of tone — "don't you think, dear, you might go to Cambridge for a few weeks? I am sure the Friedlands would take you in. You would come in for all the parties, and — and you needn't trouble about me. Sister Angela's niece could come and stay here for a few weeks. The Reverend Mother told me so."

Laura rose.

"Sister Angela suggested that? Thank you, I won't have my plans settled for me by Sister Angela. If you and Mr. Helbeck want to turn me out, why, of course I shall go."

Augustina held out her hands in terror at the girl's attitude and voice.

"Laura, don't say such things! As if you weren't an angel to me! As if I could bear the thought of anybody else!"

A quiver ran through Laura's features. "Well, then, don't bear it," she said, kneeling down again beside her stepmother. "You look quite ill and excited, Augustina. I think we'll keep the Reverend Mother out in future. Won't you lie down and let me cover you up?"

So it ended for the time — with physical weakness on Augustina's part, and caresses on Laura's.

But when she was alone, Miss Fountain sat down and tried to think things out.

"What are the Sisters meddling for? Do they find me in their way? I'm flattered! I wish I was. Well! — is drunkenness the worst thing in the world?" she asked herself deliberately. "Of course, if it goes beyond a certain point it is like madness — you must keep out of its way, for your own sake. But papa used to say there were many things a great deal worse. So there are! — meanness, and shuffling with truth for the sake of your soul. As for the other tales, I don't believe them. But if I did, I am not going to marry him!"

She felt herself very wise. In truth, as Stephen Fountain had realised with some anxiety before his death, among Laura's many ignorances, none was so complete or so dangerous as her ignorance of all the ugly ground facts that are strewn round us, for the stumbling of mankind. She was as determined not

to know them, as he was invincibly shy of telling them.

For the rest, her reflections represented, no doubt, many dicta that in the course of her young life she had heard from her father. To Stephen Fountain the whole Christian doctrine of sin was "the enemy"; and the mystical hatred of certain actions and habits, as such, was the fount of half the world's unreason.

The following day it was Father Bowles' turn. He came over in what seemed to be his softest and most catlike mood, rubbing his hands over his chest in a constant glee at his own jokes. He was amiability itself to Laura. But he, too, had his twenty minutes alone with Augustina; and afterwards Mrs. Fountain ventured once more to speak to Laura of change and amusement. Miss Fountain smiled, and replied as before — that, in the first place, she had no invitations, and in the next, she had no dresses. But again, as before, if Mr. Helbeck should express a wish that her visit to Bannisdale should come to an end, that would be another matter.

Next morning Laura was taking a walk in the park, when a letter was brought to her by old Wilson, the groom, cowman, and general factotum.

She took it to a sheltered nook by the riverside and

read it. It was from Hubert Mason, in his best commercial hand, and it ran as follows:

"Dear Miss Fountain,—You would not allow me, I know, to call you Cousin Laura any more, so I don't attempt it. And of course I don't deserve it — nor that you should ever shake hands with me again. I can't get over thinking of what I've done. Mother and Polly will tell you that I have hardly slept at nights — for of course you won't believe me. How I can have been such a blackguard I don't understand. I must have taken too much. All I know is it didn't seem much, and but for the agitation of my mind, I don't believe anything would ever have gone wrong. But I couldn't bear to see you dancing with that man and despising me. And there it is — I can never get over it, and you will never forgive me. I feel I can't stay here any more, and mother has consented at last to let me have some money on the farm. If I could just see you before I go, to say good-bye, and ask your pardon, there would be a better chance for me. I can't come to Mr. Helbeck's house, of course, and I don't suppose you would come here. I shall be coming home from Kirby Whardale fair to-morrow night, and shall be crossing the little bridge in the park — upper end — some time between eight and nine. But I know you won't be there. I can't expect it, and I

feel it pretty badly, I can tell you. I did hope I might have become something better through knowing you. Whatever you may think of me I am always

"Your respectful and humble cousin,

"HUBERT MASON."

"Well — upon my word!" said Laura. She threw the letter on to the grass beside her, and sat, with her hands round her knees, staring at the river, in a sparkle of anger and amazement.

What audacity! — to expect her to steal out at night — in the dusk, anyway — to meet him — *him!* She fed her wrath on the imagination of all the details that would belong to such an escapade. It would be after supper, of course, in the fast lengthening twilight. Helbeck and his sister would be in the drawing-room — for Mr. Helbeck was expected home on the following day — and she might perfectly well leave them, as she often did, to talk their little Catholic gossip by themselves, and then slip out by the chapel passage and door, through the old garden, to the gate in the wall above the river bank, and so to the road that led along the Greet through the upper end of the park. Nothing, of course, could be easier — nothing.

Merely to think of it, for a girl of Laura's temperament, was already bit by bit to incline to it. She

began to turn it over, to taste the adventure of it — to talk very fast to Fricka, under her breath, with little gusts of laughter. And no doubt there was something mollifying in the boy's humble expressions. As for his sleepless nights — how salutary! how very salutary! Only the nail must be driven in deeper — must be turned in the wound.

It would need a vast amount of severity, perhaps, to undo the effects of her mere obedience to his call — supposing she made up her mind to obey it. Well! she would be quite equal to severity. She would speak very plain things to him — very plain things indeed. It was her first serious adventure with any of these big, foolish, troublesome creatures of the male sex, and she rose to it much as Helbeck might have risen to the playing of a salmon in the Greet. Yes! he should say good-bye to her, let priests and nuns talk what scandal they pleased. Yes! he should go on his way forgiven and admonished — if he wished it — for kindred's sake.

Her cheek burned, her heart beat fast. He and she were of one blood — both of them ill-regarded by aristocrats and holy Romans. As for him, he was going to ruin at home; and there was in him this strange, artistic gift to be thought for and rescued. He had all the faults of the young cub. Was he to be wholly disowned for that? Was she to cast him

off for ever at the mere bidding of the Helbecks and their friends?

He would never, of course, be allowed to enter the Bannisdale drawing-room, and she had no intention at present of going to Browhead Farm. Well, then, under the skies and the clouds! A gracious pardon, an appropriate lecture — and a short farewell.

All that day and the next Laura gave herself to her whim. She was perfectly conscious, meanwhile, that it was a reckless and a wilful thing that she was planning. She liked it none the less for that. In fact, the scheme was the final crystallisation of all that bitterness of mood that had poisoned and tormented her ever since her first coming to Bannisdale. And it gave her for the moment the morbid pleasure that all angry people get from letting loose the angry word or act.

Meanwhile she became more and more conscious of a certain network of blame and discussion that seemed to be closing about her and her actions. It showed itself by a number of small signs. When she went into Whinthorpe to shop for Augustina she fancied that the assistants in the shop, and even the portly draper himself, looked at her with a sly curiosity. The girl's sore pride grew more unmanageable hour by hour. If there was some ill-natured gossip about

her, going the round in the town and neighbourhood, had she — till now — given the least shadow of excuse for it? Not the least shade of a shadow!

Mr. Helbeck, his sister, and Laura were in the drawing-room after supper. Laura had been observing Mrs. Fountain closely.

"She is longing to have her talk with him," thought the girl; "and she shall have it — as much as she likes."

The shutters were not yet closed, and the room, with its crackling logs, was filled with a gentle mingled light. The sun, indeed, was gone, but the west still glowed, and the tall larches in the front enclosure stood black against a golden dome of sky. Laura rose and left the room. As she opened the door she caught Augustina's quick look of relief and the drop of the knitting-needles.

Fricka was safely prisoned upstairs. Laura slipped on a hat and a dark cloak that were hanging in the hall, and ran down the passage leading to the chapel. The heavy seventeenth-century door at the end of it took her some trouble to open without noise, but it was done at last, and she was in the old garden.

Her little figure in its cloak, among the dark yews, was hardly to be seen in the dusk. The garden was silence itself, and the gate in the wall was open.

Once on the road beside the river she could hardly restrain herself from running, so keen was the air, so free and wide the evening solitude. All things were at peace; nothing moved but a few birds and the tiniest intermittent breeze. Overhead, great thunder-clouds kept the sunset; beneath, the blues of the evening were all interwoven with rose; so, too, were the wood and sky reflections in the gently moving water. In some of the pools the trout were still lazily rising; pigeons and homing rooks were slowly passing through the clear space that lay between the tree-tops and the just emerging stars; and once Laura stopped, holding her breath, thinking that she saw through the dusk the blue flash of a king-fisher making for a nest she knew. Even in this dimmed light the trees had the May magnificence — all but the oaks, which still dreamed of a best to come. Here and there a few tufts of primroses, on the bosom of the crag above the river, lonely and self-sufficing, like all loveliest things, starred the dimness of the rock.

Laura's feet danced beneath her; the evening beauty and her passionate response flowed as it were into each other, made one beating pulse; never, in spite of qualms and angers, had she been more physically happy, more alive. She passed the seat where she and Helbeck had lingered on Easter Sun-

day; then she struck into a path high above the river, under spreading oaks; and presently a little bridge came in sight, with some steps in the crag leading down to it.

At the near end of the bridge, thrown out into the river a little way for the convenience of fishermen, was a small wooden platform, with a railing, which held a seat. The seat was well hidden under the trees and bank, and Laura settled herself there.

She had hardly waited five minutes, absorbed in the sheer pleasure of the rippling river and the soft air, when she heard steps approaching the bank. Looking up, she saw Mason's figure against the sky. He paused at the top of the rocky staircase, to scan the bridge and its approaches. Not seeing her, he threw up his hand, with some exclamation that she could not hear.

She smiled and rose.

As her small form became visible between the paleness of the wooden platform and a luminous patch in the river, she heard a cry, then a hurrying down the rock steps.

He stopped about a yard from her. She did not offer her hand, and after an instant's pause, during which his eyes tried to search her face in the darkness, he took off his hat and drew his hand across his brow with a deep breath.

"I never thought you'd come," he said huskily.

"Well, certainly you had no business to ask me! And I can only stay a very few minutes. Suppose you sit down there."

She pointed to one of the rock steps, while she settled herself again on the seat, some little distance away from him.

Then there was an awkward silence, which Laura took no trouble to break. Mason broke it at last in desperation.

"You know that I'm an awful hand at saying anything, Miss — Miss Fountain. I can't — so it's no good. But I've got my lesson. I've had a pretty rough time of it, I can tell you, since last week."

"You behaved about as badly as you could — didn't you?" said Laura's soft yet cutting voice out of the dark.

Mason fidgeted.

"I can't make it no better," he said at last. "There's no saying I can, for I can't. And if I did give you excuses, you'd not believe 'em. There was a devil got hold of me that evening — that's the truth on't. And it was only a glass or two I took. Well, there! — I'd have cut my hand off sooner."

His tone of miserable humility began to affect her rather strangely. It was not so easy to drive in the nail.

"You needn't be so repentant," she said, with a little shrinking laugh. "One has to forget — everything — in good time. You've given Whinthorpe people something to talk about at my expense — for which I am not at all obliged to you. You nearly killed me, which doesn't matter. And you behaved disgracefully to Mr. Helbeck. But it's done — and now you've got to make up — somehow."

"Has he made you pay for it — since?" said Mason eagerly.

"He? Mr. Helbeck?" She laughed. Then she added, with all the severity she could muster, "He treated me in a most kind and gentlemanly way — if you want to know. The great pity is that you — and Cousin Elizabeth — understand nothing at all about him."

He groaned. She could hear his feet restlessly moving.

"Well — and now you are going to Froswick," she resumed. "What are you going to do there?"

"There's an uncle of mine in one of the shipbuilding yards there. He's got leave to take me into the fitting department. If I suit he'll get me into the office. It's what I've wanted this two years."

"Well, now you've got it," she said impatiently, "don't be dismal. You have your chance."

"Yes, and I don't care a haporth about it," he said,

with sudden energy, throwing his head up and bringing his fist down on his knee.

She felt her power, and liked it. But she hurried to answer:

"Oh! yes you do! If you're a man, you *must*. You'll learn a lot of new things — you'll keep straight, because you'll have plenty to do. Why, it will 'hatch you over again, and hatch you different,' as somebody said. You'll see."

He looked at her, trying hard to catch her expression in the dusk.

"And if I do come back different, perhaps — perhaps — soom day you'll not be ashamed to be seen wi' me? Look here, Miss Laura. From the first time I set eyes on you — from that day you came up — that Sunday — I haven't been able to settle to a thing. I felt, right enough, I wasn't fit to speak to you. And yet I'm your — well, your kith and kin, doan't you see? There can't be no such tremendous gap atween us as all that. If I can just manage myself a bit, and find the work that suits me, and get away from these fellows here, and this beastly farm ——"

"Ah! — have you been quarrelling with Daffady all day?"

She looked for him to fly out. But he only stared, and then turned away.

"O Lord! what's the good of talking?" he said, with an accent that startled her.

She rose from her seat.

"Are you sorry I came to talk to you? You didn't deserve it — did you?"

Her voice was the pearliest, most musical, and yet most distant of things. He rose, too — held by it.

"And now you must just go and make a man of yourself. That's what you have to do — you see? I wish papa was alive. He'd tell you how — I can't. But if you forget your music, it'll be a sin — and if you send me your song to write out for you, I'll do it. And tell Polly I'll come and see her again some day. Now good-night! They'll be locking up if I don't hurry home."

But he stood on the step, barring the way.

"I say, give me something to take with me," he said hoarsely. "What's that in your hat?"

"In my hat?" she said, laughing — (but if there had been light he would have seen that her lips had paled). "Why, a bunch of buttercups. I bought them at Whinthorpe yesterday."

"Give me one," he said.

"Give you a sham buttercup? What nonsense!"

"It's better than nothing," he said doggedly, and he held out his hand.

She hesitated; then she took off her hat and quietly loosened one of the flowers. Her golden hair shone in the dimness. Mason never took his

eyes off her little head. He was keeping a grip on himself that was taxing a whole new set of powers — straining the lad's unripe nature in wholly new ways.

She put the flower in his hand.

"There; now we're friends again, aren't we? Let me pass, please — and good-night!"

He moved to one side, blindly fighting with the impulse to throw his powerful arms round her and keep her there, or carry her across the bridge — at his pleasure.

But her light fearlessness mastered him. He let her go; he watched her figure on the steps, against the moonlight between the oaks overhead.

"Good-night!" she dropped again, already far away — far above him.

The young man felt a sob in his throat.

"My God! I shan't ever see her again," he said to himself in a sudden terror. "She is going to that house — to that man!"

For the first time a wild jealousy of Helbeck awoke in him. He rushed across the bridge, dropped on a stone half-way up the further bank, then strained his eyes across the river.

. . . Yes, there she passed, a swift moving whiteness, among the great trees that stood like watchmen along the high edge of the water. Below him

flowed the stream, a gulf of darkness, rent here and there by sheets and jags of silver. And she, that pale wraith — across it — far away — was flitting from his ken.

All the fountains of the youth's nature surged up in one great outcry and confusion. He thought of his boyish loves and sensualities — of the girls who had provoked them — of some of the ugly facts connected with them. A great astonishment, a great sickening, came upon him. He felt the burden of the flesh, the struggle of the spirit. And through it all, the maddest and most covetous yearning! — welling up through schemes and hopes, that like the moonlit ripples on the Greet, dissolved as fast as they took shape.

Meanwhile Laura went quickly home. A new tenderness, a new remorse towards the "cub" was in the girl's mind. Ought she to have gone? Had she been kind? Oh! she would be his friend and good angel — without any nonsense, of course.

She hurried through the trees and along the dimly gleaming path. Suddenly she perceived in the distance the sparkle of a lantern.

How vexatious! Was there no escape for her? She looked in some trouble at the climbing woods above, at the steep bank below.

Ah! well, her hat was large, and hid her face. And her dress was all covered by her cloak. She hastened on.

It was a man — an old man — carrying a bundle and a lantern. He seemed to waver and stop as she approached him, and at the actual moment of her passing him, to her amazement, he suddenly threw himself against one of the trees on the mountain side of the path, and his lantern showed her his face for an instant — a white face, stricken with — fear, was it? or what?

Fright gained upon herself. She ran on, and as she ran it seemed to her that she heard something fall with a clang, and, afterwards, a cry. She looked back. The old man was still there, erect, but his light was gone.

Well, no doubt he had dropped his lantern. Let him light it again. It was no concern of hers.

Here was the door in the wall. It opened to her touch. She glided in — across the garden — found the chapel door ajar, and in a few more seconds was safe in her own room.

CHAPTER III

Laura was standing before her looking-glass straightening the curls that her rapid walk had disarranged, when her attention was caught by certain unusual sounds in the house. There was a hurrying of distant feet — calls, as though from the kitchen region — and lastly, the deep voice of Mr. Helbeck. Miss Fountain paused, brush in hand, wondering what had happened.

A noise of fluttering skirts, and a cry for "Laura!" — Miss Fountain opened her door, and saw Augustina, who never ran, hurrying as fast as her feebleness would let her, towards her stepdaughter.

"Laura! — where is my sal volatile? You gave me some yesterday, you remember, for my headache. There's somebody ill, downstairs."

She paused for breath.

"Here it is," said Laura, finding the bottle, and bringing it. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, my dear, such an adventure! There's an old man fainted in the kitchen. He came to the back door to ask for a light for his lantern. Mrs. Denton

says he was shaking all over when she first saw him, and as white as her apron. He told her he'd seen the ghost! 'I've often heard tell o' the Bannisdale Lady,' he said, 'an now I've seen her!' She asked him to sit down a minute to rest himself, and he fainted straight away. He's that old Scarsbrook, you know, whose wife does our washing. They live in that cottage by the weir, the other end of the park. I must go! Mrs. Denton's giving him some brandy — and Alan's gone down. Isn't it an extraordinary thing?"

"Very," said Laura, accompanying her stepmother along the passage. "What did he see?"

She paused, laying a restraining hand on Augustina's arm — cudgelling her brains the while. Yes! she could remember now a few contemptuous remarks of Mr. Helbeck to Father Leadham on the subject of a ghost story that had sprung up during the Squire's memory in connection with the park and the house — a quite modern story, according to Helbeck, turning on the common motive of a gypsy woman and her curse, started some forty years before this date, with a local success not a little offensive, apparently, to the owner of Bannisdale.

"What did he see?" repeated the girl. "Don't hurry, Augustina; you know the doctor told you not. Shall I take the sal volatile?"

"Oh, no!—they want me." In any matter of doctoring small or great, Augustina had the happiest sense of her own importance. "I don't know what he saw exactly. It was a lady, he says—he knew it was, by the hat and the walk. She was all in black—with 'a Dolly Varden hat'—fancy the old fellow!—that hid her face—and a little white hand, that shot out sparks as he came up to her! Did you ever hear such a tale? Now, Laura, I'm all right. Let me go. Come when you like."

Augustina hurried off; Laura was left standing pensive in the passage.

"H'm, that's unlucky," she said to herself.

Then she looked down at her right hand. An old-fashioned diamond ring with a large centre stone, which had been her mother's, shone on the third finger. With an involuntary smile, she drew off the ring, and went back to her room.

"What's to be done now?" she thought, as she put the ring in a drawer. "Shall I go down and explain—say I was out for a stroll?"—She shook her head.—"Won't do now—I should have had more presence of mind a minute ago. Augustina would suspect a hundred things. It's really dramatic. Shall I go down? He didn't see my face—no, that I'll answer for! Here's for it!"

She pulled out the golden mass of her hair till it

made a denser frame than usual round her brow, looked at her white dress — shook her head dubiously — laughed at her own flushed face in the glass, and calmly went downstairs.

She found an anxious group in the great bare servants' hall. The old man, supported by pillows, was stretched on a wooden settle, with Helbeck, Augustina, and Mrs. Denton standing by. The first things she saw were the old peasant's closed eyes and pallid face — then Helbeck's grave and puzzled countenance above him. The Squire turned at Miss Fountain's step. Did she imagine it — or was there a peculiar sharpness in his swift glance?

Mrs. Denton had just been administering a second dose of brandy, and was apparently in the midst of her own report to her master of Scarsbrook's story.

"'I wor just aboot to pass her,' he said, 'when I nawticed 'at her feet made noa noise. She keäm glidin — an glidin — an my hair stood reet oop — it lifted t'whole top o' my yed. An she gaed passt me like a puff o' wind — as cauld as ice — an I wor mair deed nor alive. An I luked afther her, an she vanisht i' th' varra middle o' t' path. An my leet went oot — an I durstn't ha gane on, if it wor iver so — so I juist crawled back tet hoose ——'"

"The door in the wall!" thought Laura. "He didn't know it was there."

She had remained in the background while Mrs. Denton was speaking, but now she approached the settle. Mrs. Denton threw a sour look at her, and flounced out of her way. Helbeck silently made room for her. As she passed him, she felt instinctively that his distant politeness had become something more pronounced. He left her questions to Augustina to answer, and himself thrust his hands into his pockets and moved away.

"Have you sent for anyone?" said Laura to Mrs. Fountain.

"Yes. Wilson's gone in the pony cart for the wife. And if he doesn't come round by the time she gets here — some one will have to go for the doctor, Alan?"

She looked round vaguely.

"Of course. Wilson must go on," said Helbeck from the distance. "Or I'll go myself."

"But he is coming round," said Laura, pointing.

"If yo'll nobbut move oot o' t' way, Miss, we'll be able to get at 'im," said Mrs. Denton sharply. Laura hastily obeyed her. The housekeeper brought more brandy; then signs of returning force grew stronger, and by the time the wife appeared the old fellow was feebly beginning to move and look about him.

Amid the torrent of lamentations, questions, and hypotheses that the wife poured forth, Laura with-

drew into the background. But she could not prevail on herself to go. Daring or excitement held her there, till the old man should be quite himself again.

He struggled to his feet at last, and said, with a long sigh that was still half a shudder, "Aye — noo I'll goa home — Lisbeth."

He was a piteous spectacle as he stood there, still trembling through all his stunted frame, his wrinkled face drawn and bloodless, his grey hair in a tragic confusion. Suddenly, as he looked at his wife, he said with a clear solemnity, "Lisbeth — I ha' got my death warrant!"

"Don't say any such thing, Scarsbrook," said Helbeck, coming forward to support him. "You know I don't believe in this ghost business — and never did. You saw some stranger in the park — and she passed you too quickly for you to see where she went to. You may be sure that'll turn out to be the truth. You remember — it's a public path — anybody might be there. Just try and take that view of it — and don't fret, for your wife's sake. We'll make inquiries, and I'll come and see you to-morrow. And as for death warrants, we're all in God's care, you know — don't forget that."

He smiled with a kindly concern and pity on the old man. But Scarsbrook shook his head.

"It wur t' Bannisdale Lady," he repeated; "I've often heerd on her — often — and noo I've seen her."

"Well, to-morrow you'll be quite proud of it," said Helbeck cheerfully. "Come, and let me put you into the cart. I think, if we make a comfortable seat for you, you'll be fit to drive home now."

Supported by the Squire's strong arm on one side, and his wife on the other, Scarsbrook managed to hobble down the long passage leading to the door in the inner courtyard, where the pony cart was standing. It was evident that his perceptions were still wholly dazed. He had not recognised or spoken to anyone in the room but the Squire — not even to his old crony Mrs. Denton.

Laura drew a long breath.

"Augustina, do go to bed," she said, going up to her stepmother — "or you'll be ill next."

Augustina allowed herself to be led upstairs. But it was long before she would let her stepdaughter leave her. She was full of supernatural terrors and excitements, and must talk about all the former appearances of the ghost — the stories that used to be told in her childhood — the new or startling details in the old man's version, and so forth. "What could he have meant by the light on the hand?" she said wondering. "I never heard of that before. And she used always to be in grey; and now he says that she had a black dress from top to toe."

"Their wardrobes are so limited — poor damp, sloppy things!" said Laura flippantly, as she brushed her stepmother's hair. "Do you suppose this nonsense will be all over the country-side to-morrow, Augustina?"

"What do you *really* think he saw, Laura?" cried Mrs. Fountain, wavering between doubt and belief.

"Goodness! — don't ask me." Miss Fountain shrugged her small shoulders. "I don't keep a family ghost."

When at last Augustina had been settled in bed, and persuaded to take some of her sleeping medicine, Laura was bidding her good-night, when Mrs. Fountain said, "Oh! I forgot, Laura — there was a letter brought in for you from the post-office, by Wilson this afternoon — he gave it to Mrs. Denton, and she forgot it till after dinner ——"

"Of course — because it was mine," said Laura vindictively. "Where is it?"

"On the drawing-room chimney-piece."

"All right. I'll go for it. But I shall be disturbing Mr. Helbeck."

"Oh! no — it's much too late. Alan will have gone to his study."

Miss Fountain stood a moment outside her stepmother's door, consulting her watch.

For she was anxious to get her letter, and not at all anxious to fall in with Mr. Helbeck. At least, so she would have explained herself had anyone questioned her. In fact, her wishes and intentions were in tumultuous confusion. All the time that she was waiting on Augustina, her brain, her pulse was racing. In the added touch of stiffness which she had observed in Helbeck's manner, she easily divined the result of that conversation he had no doubt held with Augustina after dinner, while she was by the river. Did he think even worse of her than he had before? Well!—if he and Augustina could do without her, let them send her away—by all manner of means! She had her own friends, her own money, was in all respects her own mistress, and only asked to be allowed to lead her life as she pleased.

Nevertheless—as she crossed the darkness of the hall, with her candle in her hand—Laura Fountain was very near indeed to a fit of wild weeping. During the months following her father's death, these agonies of crying had come upon her night after night—unseen by any human being. She felt now the approach of an old enemy and struggled with it. "One mustn't have this excitement every night!" she said to herself, half mocking. "No nerves would stand it."

A light under the library door. Well and good. How—she wondered—did he occupy himself there,

through so many solitary hours? Once or twice she had heard him come upstairs to bed, and never before one or two o'clock.

Suddenly she stood abashed. She had thrown open the drawing-room door, and the room lay before her, almost in darkness. One dim lamp still burned at the further end, and in the middle of the room stood Mr. Helbeck, arrested in his walk to and fro, and the picture of astonishment.

Laura drew back in real discomfiture. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Helbeck! I had no notion that anyone was still here."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he said advancing.

"Augustina told me there was a letter for me this evening."

"Of course. It is here on the mantelpiece. I ought to have remembered it."

He took up the letter and held it towards her. Then suddenly he paused, and sharply withdrawing it, he placed it on a table beside him, and laid his hand upon it. She saw a flash of quick resolution in his face, and her own pulses gave a throb.

"Miss Fountain, will you excuse my detaining you for a moment? I have been thinking much about this old man's story, and the possible explanation of it. It struck me in a very singular way. As you

know, I have never paid much attention to the ghost story here — we have never before had a testimony so direct. Is it possible — that you might throw some light upon it? You left us, you remember, after dinner. Did you by chance go into the garden? — the evening was tempting, I think. If so, your memory might possibly recall to you some — slight thing."

"Yes," she said, after a moment's hesitation, "I did go into the garden."

His eye gleamed. He came a step nearer.

"Did you see or hear anything — to explain what happened?"

She did not answer for a moment. She made a vague movement, as though to recover her letter — looked curiously into a glass case that stood beside her, containing a few Stuart relics and autographs. Then, with absolute self-possession, she turned and confronted him, one hand resting on the glass case.

"Yes; I can explain it all. I was the ghost!"

There was a moment's silence. A smile — a smile that she winced under, showed itself on Helbeck's lip.

"I imagined as much," he said quietly.

She stood there, torn by different impulses. Then a passion of annoyance with herself, and anger with him, descended on her.

"Now perhaps you would like to know why I con-

cealed it?" she said, with all the dignity she could command. "Simply, because I had gone out to meet and say good-bye to a person — who is my relation — whom I cannot meet in this house, and against whom there is here an unreasonable —" She hesitated; then resumed, leaning obstinately on the words — "Yes! take it all in all, it *is* an unreasonable prejudice."

"You mean Mr. Hubert Mason?"

She nodded.

"You think it an unreasonable prejudice after what happened the other night?"

She wavered.

"I don't want to defend what happened the other night," she said, while her voice shook.

Helbeck observed her carefully. There was a great decision in his manner, and at the same time a fine courtesy.

"You knew, then, that he was to be in the park? Forgive my questions. They are not mere curiosity."

"Perhaps not," she said indifferently. "But I think I have told you all that needs to be told. May I have my letter?"

She stepped forward.

"One moment. I wonder, Miss Fountain," — he chose his words slowly — "if I could make you understand my position. It is this. My sister brings a young lady, her stepdaughter, to stay under my

roof. That young lady happens to be connected with a family in this neighbourhood, which is already well known to me. For some of its members I have nothing but respect — about one I happen to have a strong opinion. I have reasons for my opinion. I imagine that very few people of any way of thinking would hold me either unreasonable or prejudiced in the matter. Naturally, it gives me some concern that a young lady towards whom I feel a certain responsibility should be much seen with this young man. He is not her equal socially, and — pardon me — she knows nothing at all about the type to which he belongs. Indirectly I try to warn her. I speak to my sister as gently as I can. But from the first she rejects all I have to say — she gives me credit for no good intention — and she will have none of my advice. At last a disagreeable incident happens — and unfortunately the knowledge of it is not confined to ourselves ——"

Laura threw him a flashing look.

"No! — there are people who have taken care of that!" she said.

Helbeck took no notice.

"It is known not only to ourselves," he repeated steadily. "It starts gossip. My sister is troubled. She asks you to put an end to this state of things, and she consults me, feeling that indeed we are all in some way concerned."

"Oh, say at once that I have brought scandal on you all!" cried Laura. "That of course is what Sister Angela and Father Bowles have been saying to Augustina. They are pleased to show the greatest anxiety about me — so much so, that they most kindly wish to relieve me of the charge of Augustina. — So I understand! But I fear I am neither docile nor grateful! — that I never shall be grateful ——"

Helbeck interrupted.

"Let us come to that presently. I should like to finish my story. While my sister and I are consulting, trying to think of all that can be done to stop a foolish talk and undo an unlucky incident, this same young lady" — his voice took a cold clearness — "steals out by night to keep an appointment with this man, who has already done her so great a disservice. Now I should like to ask her, if all this is kind — is reasonable — is generous towards the persons with whom she is at present living — if such conduct is not" — he paused — "unwise towards herself — unjust towards others."

His words came out with a strong and vibrating emphasis. Laura confronted him with crimson cheeks.

"I think that will do, Mr. Helbeck!" she cried. "You have had your say. — Now just let me say this, — these people were my relations — I have no other kith and kin in the world."

He made a quick step forward as though in distress. But she put up her hand.

"I want very much to say this, please. I knew perfectly well when I came here that you couldn't like the Masons — for many reasons." Her voice broke again. "You never liked Augustina's marriage — you weren't likely to want to see anything of papa's people. I didn't ask you to see them. All my standards and theirs are different from yours. But I prefer theirs — not yours! I have nothing to do with yours. I was brought up — well, to *hate* yours — if one must tell the truth."

She paused, half suffocated, her chest heaving. Helbeck's glance enveloped her — took in the contrast between her violent words and the shrinking delicacy of her small form. A great melting stole over the man's dark face. But he spoke dryly enough.

"I imagine the standards of Protestants and Catholics are pretty much alike in matters of this kind. But don't let us waste time any more over what has already happened. I should like, I confess, to plead with you as to the future."

He looked at her kindly, even entreatingly. All through this scene she had been unwillingly, angrily conscious of his personal dignity and charm — a dignity that seemed to emerge in moments of heightened

action or feeling, and to slip out of sight again under the absent hermit-manner of his ordinary life. She was smarting under his words — ready to concentrate a double passion of resentment upon them, as soon as she should be alone and free to recall them. And yet ——

"As to the future," she said coldly. "That is simple enough as far as one person is concerned. Hubert Mason is going to Froswick immediately, into business."

"I am glad to hear it — it will be very much for his good."

He stopped a moment, searching for the word of persuasion and conciliation.

"Miss Fountain! — if you imagine that certain incidents which happened here long before you came into this neighbourhood had anything to do with what I have been saying now, let me assure you — most earnestly — that it is not so! I recognise fully that with regard to a certain case — of which you may have heard — the Masons and their friends honestly believed that wrong and injustice had been done. They attempted personal violence. I can hardly be expected to think it argument! But I bear them no malice. I say this because you may have heard of something that happened three or four years ago — a row in the streets, when Father Bowles and I were

set upon. It has never weighed with me in the slightest, and I could have shaken hands with old Mason — who was in the crowd, and refused to stop the stone throwing — the day after. As for Mrs. Mason" — he looked up with a smile — "if she could possibly have persuaded herself to come with her daughter and see you here, my welcome would not have been wanting. But, you know, she would as soon visit Gehenna! Nobody could be more conscious than I, Miss Fountain, that this is a dreary house for a young lady to live in — and ——"

The colour mounted into his face, but he did not shrink from what he meant to say.

"And you have made us all feel that you regard the practices and observances by which we try to fill and inspire our lives, as mere hateful folly and superstition!" He checked himself. "Is that too strong?" he added, with a sudden eagerness. "If so, I apologise for and withdraw it!"

Laura, for a moment, was speechless. Then she gathered her forces, and said, with a voice she in vain tried to compose:

"I think you exaggerate, Mr. Helbeck; at any rate, I hope you do. But the fact is, I — I ought not to have tried to bear it. Considering all that had happened at home — it was more than I had strength for! And perhaps — no good will come of going on

with it — and it had better cease. Mr. Helbeck! — if your Superior can really find a good nurse and companion at once, will you kindly communicate with her? I will go to Cambridge immediately, as soon as I can arrange with my friends. Augustina, no doubt, will come and stay with me somewhere at the sea, later on in the year."

Helbeck had been listening to her — to the sharp determination of her voice — in total silence. He was leaning against the high mantelpiece, and his face was hidden from her. As she ceased to speak, he turned, and his mere aspect beat down the girl's anger in a moment. He shook his head sadly.

"Dr. MacBride stopped me on the bridge yesterday, as he was coming away from the house."

Laura drew back. Her eyes fastened upon him.

"He thinks her in a serious state. We are not to alarm her, or interfere with her daily habits. There is valvular disease — as I think you know — and it has advanced. Neither he nor anyone can forecast."

The girl's head fell. She recognised that the contest was over. She could not go; she could not leave Augustina; and the inference was clear. There had not been a word of menace, but she understood. Mr. Helbeck's will must prevail. She had brought this humiliating half-hour on herself — and she would

have to bear the consequences of it. She moved towards Helbeck.

"Well then, I must stay," she said huskily, "and I must try to — to remember where I am in future. I ought to be able to hide everything I feel — of course! But that unfortunately is what I never learnt. And — there are some ways of life — that — that are too far apart. However!" — she raised her hand to her brow, frowned, and thought a little — "I can't make any promise about my cousins, Mr. Helbeck. *I* know perfectly well — whatever may be said — that I have done nothing whatever to be ashamed of. I have wanted to — to help my cousin. He is worth helping — in spite of everything — and I *will* help him, if I can! But if I am to remain your guest, I see that I must consult your wishes ——"

Helbeck tried again to stop her with a gesture, but she hurried on.

"As far as this house and neighbourhood are concerned, no one shall have any reason — to talk."

Then she threw her head back with a sudden flush.

"Of course, if people are born to say and think ill-natured things! — like Mrs. Denton ——"

Helbeck exclaimed.

"I will see to that," he said. "You shall have no reason to complain, there."

Laura shrugged her shoulders.

"Will you kindly give me my letter?"

As he handed it to her, she made him a little bow, walked to the door before he could open it for her, and was gone.

Helbeck turned back, with a smothered exclamation. He put the lamps out, and went slowly to his study.

As the master of Bannisdale closed the door of his library behind him, the familiar room produced upon him a sharp and singular impression. The most sacred and the most critical hours of his life had been passed within its walls. As he entered it now, it seemed to repulse him, to be no longer his.

The room was not large. It was the old library of the house, and the Helbecks in their palmiest days had never been a literary race. There was a little seventeenth century theology; and a few English classics. There were the French books of Helbeck's grandmother — "Madame," as she was always known at Bannisdale; and amongst them the worn brown volumes of St. François de Sales, with the yellowish paper slips that Madame had put in to mark her favourite passages, somewhere in the days of the First Empire. Near by were some stray military volumes, treatises on tactics and fortification, that had belonged to a dashing young officer in the Dillon

Regiment, close to some "Epîtres Amoureuses," a translation of "Daphnis and Chloe," and the like — all now sunk together into the same dusty neglect.

On the wall above Helbeck's writing-table were ranged the books that had been his mother's, together with those that he himself habitually used. Here every volume was an old friend, a familiar tool. Alan Helbeck was neither a student nor a man of letters; but he had certain passionate prejudices, instincts, emotions, of which some books were the source and sustenance.

For the rest — during some years he had been a member of the Third Order of St. Francis, and in its other features the room was almost the room of a religious. A priedieu stood against the inner wall, and a crucifix hung above it. A little further on was a small altar of St. Joseph with its pictures, its statuette, and its candles; and a poor lithograph of Pio Nono looked down from the mantelpiece. The floor was almost bare, save for a few pieces of old matting here and there. The worn Turkey carpet that had formerly covered it had been removed to make the drawing-room comfortable for Augustina; so had most of the chairs. Those left were of the straightest and hardest.

In that dingy room, however, Helbeck had known the most blessed, the most intimate moments of

the spiritual life. To-night he entered it with a strange sense of wrench — of mortal discouragement. Mechanically he went to his writing-table, and, sitting down before it, he took a key from his watch-chain and opened a large locked note-book that lay upon it.

The book contained a number of written meditations, a collection of passages and thoughts, together with some faded photographs of his mother, and of his earliest Jesuit teachers at Stonyhurst.

On the last page was a paragraph that only the night before he had copied from one of his habitual books of devotion — copying it as a spiritual exercise — making himself dwell upon every word of it.

"When shall I desire Thee alone — feed on Thee alone — O my Delight, my only good! O my loving and almighty Lord! free now this wretched heart from every attachment, from every earthly affection; adorn it with Thy holy virtues, and with a pure intention of doing all things to please Thee, that so I may open it to Thee, and with gentle violence compel Thee to come in, that Thou, O Lord, mayest work therein without resistance all those effects which from all Eternity Thou hast desired to produce in me."

He lingered a little on the words, his face buried in his hands. Then slowly he turned back to an earlier page —

"Man must use creatures as being in themselves indifferent. He must not be under their power, but use them for his own purpose, his own first and chiefest purpose, the salvation of his soul."

A shudder passed through him. He rose hastily from his seat, and began to pace the room. He had already passed through a wrestle of the same kind, and had gone away to fight down temptation. To-night the struggle was harder. The waves of rising passion broke through him.

"Little pale, angry face! I gave her a scolding like a child — what joy to have forgiven her like a child! — to have asked her pardon in return — to have felt the soft head against my breast. She was very fierce with me — she hates me, I suppose. And yet — she is not indifferent to me! — she knows when I am there. Downstairs she was conscious of me all through — I knew it. Her secret was in her face. I guessed it — foolish child — from the first moment. Strange, stormy nature! — I see it all — her passion for her father, and for these peasants as belonging to him — her hatred of me and of our faith, because her father hated us — her feeling for Augustina — that rigid sense of obligation she has, just on the two or three points — points of natural affection. It is this sense, perhaps, that makes the soul of her struggle with this house — with me.

How she loathes all that we love — humility, patience, obedience! She would sooner die than obey. Unless she loved! Then what an art, what an enchantment to command her! It would tax a lover's power, a lover's heart, to the utmost. Ah!"

He stood still, and with an effort of iron resolution put from him the fancies that were thronging on the brain. If it were possible for him to conquer her, conceivable that he might win her — such a dream was forbidden to him, Alan Helbeck, a thousandfold! Such a marriage would be the destruction of innumerable schemes for the good of the Church, for the perfecting of his own life. It would be the betrayal of great trusts, the abandonment of great opportunities. "My life would centre in her. She would come first — the Church second. Her nature would work on mine — not mine on hers. Could I ever speak to her even of what I believe? — the very alphabet of it is unknown to her. I shrink from proselytism. God forgive me! — it is her wild pagan self that I love — that I desire ——"

The blast of human longing, human pain, was hard to meet — hard to subdue. But the Catholic fought — and conquered.

"I am not my own — I have taken tasks upon me that no honest man could betray. There are vows on me also, that bind me specially to our Lord — to his

Church. The Church frowns on such a love — such marriages. She does not forbid them — but they pain her heart. I have accepted her judgment till now, without difficulty, without conflict. Now to obey is hard. But I can obey — we are not asked impossibilities."

He walked to the crucifix, and threw himself down before it. A midnight stillness brooded over the house.

But far away, in an upper room, Laura Fountain had cried herself to sleep — only to wake again and again, with the tears flooding her cheeks. Was it merely a disagreeable and exciting scene she had gone through? What was this new invasion of her life? — this new presence to the inward eye of a form and look that at once drew her and repulsed her. A hundred alien forces were threatening and pressing upon her — and out from the very heart of them came this strange drawing — this magnetism — this troubling misery.

To be prisoned in Bannisdale — under Mr. Helbeck's roof — for months and months longer — this thought was maddening to her.

But when she imagined herself free to go — and far away once more from this old and melancholy house — among congenial friends and scenes — she

was no happier than before. A little moan of anger and pain came, that she stifled against her pillow, calling passionately on the sleep that would, that must, chase all these phantoms of fatigue or excitement — and give her back her old free self.

BOOK III

BOOK III

CHAPTER I

"We shall get there in capital time — that's nice!" said Polly Mason, putting down the little railway guide she had just purchased at Marsland Station, with a general rustle of satisfaction.

Polly indeed shone with good temper and new clothes. Her fringe — even halved — was prodigious. Her cheap lemon-coloured gloves were cracking on her large hands; and round her beflowered hat she had tied clouds on clouds of white tulle, which to some extent softened the tans and crimsons of her complexion. Her dress was of a stiff white cotton stuff, that fell into the most startling folds and angles; and at every movement of it, the starch rattled.

On the opposite seat of the railway carriage was Laura Fountain — an open book upon her knee that she was not reading. She made no answer, however, to Polly's remark; the impression left by her attitude was that she took no interest in it. Miss Fountain herself hardly seemed to have profited much by that

Westmoreland air whereof the qualities were to do so much for Augustina. It was now June, the end of June, and Laura was certainly paler, less blooming, than she had been in March. She seemed more conscious; she was certainly less radiant. Whether her prettiness had gained by the slight change, might be debated. Polly's eyes, indeed, as they sped along, paid her cousin one long covetous tribute. The difficulty that she always had in putting on her own clothes, and softening her own physical points, made her the more conscious of Laura's delicate ease, of all the yielding and graceful lines into which the little black and white muslin frock fell so readily, of all that natural kinship between Laura and her hats, Laura and her gloves, which poor Polly fully perceived, knowing well and sadly that she herself could never attain to it.

Nevertheless — pretty, Miss Fountain might be; elegant she certainly was; but Polly did not find her the best of companions for a festal day. They were going to Froswick — the big town on the coast — to meet Hubert and another young man, one Mr. Seaton, foreman in a large engineering concern, whose name Polly had not been able to mention without bridling, for some time past.

It was more than a fortnight since the sister, driven by Hubert's incessant letters, had proposed to Laura

that they two should spend a summer day at Froswick and see the great steel works on which the fame of that place depended, escorted and entertained by the two young men. Laura at first had turned a deaf ear. Then all at once — a very flare of eagerness and acceptance! — a sudden choosing of day and train. And now that they were actually on their way, with everything arranged, and a glorious June sun above their heads, Laura was so silent, so reluctant, so irritable — you might have thought ——

Well! — Polly really did not know what to think. She was not quite happy herself. From time to time, as her look dwelt on Laura, she was conscious of certain guilty reserves and concealments in her own breast. She wished Hubert had more sense — she hoped to goodness it would all go off nicely! But of course it would. Polly was an optimist and took all things simply. Her anxieties for Laura did not long resist the mere pleasure of the journey and the trip, the flatteries of expectation. What a very respectable and, on the whole, good-looking young man was Mr. Seaton! Polly had met him first at the Browhead dance; so that what was a mere black and ugly spot in Laura's memory shone rosy-red in her cousin's.

Meanwhile Laura, mainly to avoid Polly's conversation, was looking hard out of window. They were running along the southern shore of a great

estuary. Behind the loitering train rose the hills they had just left, the hills that sheltered the stream and the woods of Bannisdale. That rich, dark patch beneath the further brow was the wood in which the house stood. To the north, across the bay, ran the line of high mountains, a dim paradise of sunny slopes and steeps, under the keenest and brightest of skies — blue ramparts from which the gently opening valleys flowed downwards, one beside the other, to the estuary and the sea.

Not that the great plunging sea itself was much to be seen as yet. Immediately beyond the railway line stretched leagues of firm reddish sand, pierced by the innumerable channels of the Greet. The sun lay hot and dazzling on the wide flat surfaces, on the flocks of gulls, on the pools of clear water. The window was open, and through the June heat swept a sharp, salt breath. Laura, however, felt none of the physical exhilaration that as a rule overflowed in her so readily. Was it because the Bannisdale Woods were still visible? What made the significance of that dark patch to the girl's restless eye? She came back to it again and again. It was like a flag, round which a hundred warring thoughts had come to gather.

Why?

Were not she and Mr. Helbeck on the best of terms? Was not Augustina quite pleased — quite

content? "I always knew, my dear Laura, that you and Alan would get on, in time. Why, anyone could get on with Alan — he's so kind!" When these things were said, Laura generally laughed. She did not remind Mrs. Fountain that she, at one time of her existence, had not found it particularly easy and simple to "get on with Alan"; but the girl did once allow herself the retort — "It's not so easy to quarrel, is it, when you don't see a person from week's end to week's end?" "Week's end to week's end?" Mrs. Fountain repeated vaguely. "Yes — Alan is away a great deal — people trust him so much — he has so much business."

Laura was of opinion that his first business might very well have been to see a little more of his widowed sister! She and Augustina spent days and days alone, while Mr. Helbeck pursued the affairs of the Church. One precious attempt indeed had been made to break the dulness of Bannisdale. Miss Fountain's cheeks burned when she thought of it. There had been an afternoon party! though Augustina's widowhood was barely a year old! Mrs. Fountain had been sent about the country delivering notes and cards. And the result: — oh, such a party! — such an interminable afternoon! Where had the people come from? — who were they? If Polly, full of curiosity, asked for some details, Laura would

toss her head and reply that she knew nothing at all about it; that Mrs. Denton had provided bad tea and worse cakes, and the guests had "filled their chairs," and there was nothing else to say. Mr. Helbeck's shyness and efforts; the glances of appeal he threw every now and then towards his sister; his evident depression when the thing was done — these things were not told to Polly. There was a place for them in the girl's sore mind; but they did not come to speech. Anyway she believed — nay, was quite sure — that Bannisdale would not be so tried a second time. For whose benefit was it done? — whose!

One evening ——

As the train crossed the bridge of the estuary, from one stretch of hot sand to another, Laura, staring at the view, saw really nothing but an image of the mind, felt nothing except what came through the magic of memory.

The hall of Bannisdale, with the lingering daylight of the north still coming in at ten o'clock through the uncurtained oriel windows — herself at the piano, Augustina on the settle — a scent of night and flowers spreading through the dim place from the open windows of the drawing-room beyond. One candle is beside her — and there are strange glints of moonlight here and there on the panelling. A tall figure enters from the chapel passage. Augustina makes

room on the settle — the Squire leans back and listens. And the girl at the piano plays; the stillness and the night seem to lay releasing hands upon her; bonds that have been stifling and cramping the soul break down; she plays with all her self, as she might have talked or wept to a friend — to her father. . . . And at last, in a pause, the Squire puts a new candle beside her, and his deep shy voice commends her, asks her to go on playing. Afterwards, there is a pleasant and gentle talk for half an hour — Augustina can hardly be made to go to bed — and when at last she rises, the girl's small hand slips into the man's, is lost there, feels a new lingering touch, from which both withdraw in almost equal haste. And the night, for the girl, is broken with restlessness, with wild efforts to draw the old fetters tight again, to clamp and prison something that flutters — that struggles.

Then next morning, there is an empty chair at the breakfast table. "The Squire left early on business." Without any warning — any courteous message? One evening at home, after a long absence, and then — off again! A good Catholic, it seems, lives in the train, and makes himself the catspaw of all who wish to use him for their own ends!

. . . As to that old peasant, Scarsbrook, what could be more arbitrary, more absurd, than Mr. Helbeck's behaviour? The matter turns out to be serious.

Fright blanches the old fellow's beard and hair; he takes to his bed, and the doctor talks of severe "nervous shock" — very serious, often deadly, at the patient's age. Why not confess everything at once, set things straight, free the poor shaken mind from its oppression? Who's afraid? — what harm is there in an after-dinner stroll?

But there! — truth apparently is what no one wants, what no one will have — least of all, Mr. Helbeck. She sees a meeting in the park, under the oaks — the same tall man and the girl — the girl bound impetuously for confession, and the soothing of old Scarsbrook's terrors once for all — the man standing in the way, as tough and prickly as one of his own hawthorns. Courtesy, of course! there is no one can make courtesy so galling; and then such a shooting out of will and personality, so sudden, so volcanic a heat of remonstrance! And a woman is such a poor ill-strung creature, even the boldest of them! She yields when she should have pressed forward — goes home to rage, when she should have stayed to wrestle.

Afterwards, another absence — the old house silent as the grave — and Augustina so fretful, so wearisome! But she is better, much better. How unscrupulous are doctors, and those other persons who make them say exactly what suits the moment!

The dulness seems to grow with the June heat.

Soon it becomes intolerable. Nobody comes, nobody speaks; no mind offers itself to yours for confidence and sympathy. Well, but change and excitement of some sort one *must* have! — who is to blame, if you get it where you can?

A day in Froswick with Hubert Mason? Yes — why not? Polly proposes it — has proposed it once or twice before to no purpose. For two months now the young man has been in training. Polly writes to him often; Laura sometimes wonders whether the cross-examinations through which Polly puts her may not partly be for Hubert's benefit. She herself has written twice to him in answer to some half-dozen letters, has corrected his song for him — has played altogether a very moral and sisterly part. Is the youth really in love? Perhaps. Will it do him any harm?

Augustina of course dislikes the prospect of the Froswick day. But, really, Augustina must put up with it! The Reverend Mother will come for the afternoon, and keep her company. Such civility of late on the part of all the Catholic friends of Bannisdale towards Miss Fountain! — a civility always on the watch, week by week, day by day — that never yields itself for an instant, has never a human impulse, an unguarded tone. Father Leadham is there one day — he makes a point of talking with Miss

Fountain. He leads the conversation to Cambridge, to her father — his keen glance upon her all the time, the hidden life of the convert and the mystic leaping every now and then to the surface, and driven down again by a will that makes itself felt — even by so cool a listener — as a living tyrannous thing, developed out of all proportion to, nay at the cruel expense of, the rest of the personality. Yet it is no will of the man's own — it is the will of his order, of his faith. And why these repeated stray references to Bannisdale — to its owner — to the owner's goings and comings? They are hardly questions, but they might easily have done the work of questions had the person addressed been willing. Laura laughs to think of it.

Ah! well — but discretion to-day, discretion to-morrow, discretion always, is not the most amusing of diets. How dumb, how tame, has she become! There is no one to fight with, nothing whereon to let loose the sharp-edged words and sayings that lie so close behind the girl's shut lips. How amazing that one should positively miss those fuller activities in the chapel that depend on the Squire's presence! Father Bowles says Mass there twice a week; the light still burns before the altar; several times a day Augustina disappears within the heavy doors. But when Mr. Helbeck is at home, the place becomes, as

it were, the strong heart of the house. It beats through the whole organism; so that no one can ignore or forget it.

What is it that makes the difference when he returns? Unwillingly, the mind shapes its reply A sense of unity and law comes back into the house — a hidden dignity and poetry. The Squire's black head carries with it stern reminders, reminders that challenge or provoke; but "he nothing common does nor mean," and smaller mortals, as the weeks go by, begin to feel their hot angers and criticisms driven back upon themselves, to realise the strange persistency and force of the religious life.

Inhuman force! But force of any kind tends to draw, to conquer. More than once Laura sees herself at night, almost on the steps of the chapel, in the dark shadows of the passage — following Augustina. But she has never yet mounted the steps — never passed the door. Once or twice she has angrily snatched herself from listening to the distant voice.

. . . Mr. Helbeck makes very little comment on the Froswick plan. One swift involuntary look at breakfast, as who might say — "Our compact?" But there was no compact. And go she will.

And at last all opposition clears away. It must be Mr. Helbeck who has silenced Augustina — for even she complains no more. Trains are looked out;

arrangements are made to fetch Polly from a half-way village; a fly is ordered to meet the 9.10 train at night. Why does one feel a culprit all through? Absurdity! Is one to be mewed up all one's life, to throw over all fun and frolic at Mr. Helbeck's bidding — Mr. Helbeck, who now scarcely sets foot in Bannisdale, who seems to have turned his back upon his own house, since that precise moment when his sister and her stepdaughter came to inhabit it? Never till this year was he restless in this way — so says Mrs. Denton, whose temper grows shorter and shorter.

Oh — as to fun and frolic! The girl yawns as she looks out of window. What a long hot day it is going to be — and how foolish are all expeditions, all formal pleasures! 9.10 at Marsland — about seven, she supposes, at Froswick? Already her thoughts are busy, hungrily busy with the evening, and the return.

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The train sped along. They passed a litle watering-place under the steep wooded hills — a furnace of sun on this hot June day, in winter a soft and sheltered refuge from the north. Further on rose the ruins of a great Cistercian abbey, great ribs and arches of red sandstone, that still, in ruin, made the soul and beauty of a quiet valley; then a few busy towns with mills and factories, the

fringe of that industrial district which lies on the southern and western border of the Lake Country; more wide valleys sweeping back into blue mountains; a wealth of June leaf and blossoming tree; and at last docks and buildings, warehouses and "works," a network of spreading railway lines, and all the other signs of an important and growing town. The train stopped amid a crowd, and Polly hurried to the door.

"Why, Hubert! — Mr. Seaton! — Here we are!"

She beckoned wildly, and not a few passers-by turned to look at the nodding clouds of tulle.

"We shall find them, Polly — don't shout," said Laura behind her, in some disgust.

Shout and beckon, however, Polly did and would, till the two young men were finally secured.

"Why, Hubert, you never towd me what a big place 'twas," said Polly joyously. "Lor, Mr. Seaton, doan't fash yoursel. This is Miss Fountain — my cousin. You'll remember her, I knaw."

Mr. Seaton began a polite and stilted speech while possessing himself of Polly's shawl and bag. He was a very superior young man of the clerk or foreman type, somewhat ill put together at the waist, with a flat back to his head, and a cadaverous countenance. Laura gave him a rapid look. But her chief curiosity was for Hubert. And at

her first glance she saw the signs of that strong and silent process perpetually going on amongst us that tames the countryman to the life and habits of the town. It was only a couple of months since the young athlete from the fells had been brought within its sway, and already the marks of it were evident in dress, speech, and manner. The dialect was almost gone; the black Sunday coat was of the most fashionable cut that Froswick could provide; and as they walked along, Laura detected more than once in the downcast eyes of her companion, a stealthy anxiety as to the knees of his new grey trousers. So far the change was not an embellishment. The first loss of freedom and rough strength is never that. But it roused the girl's notice, and a sort of secret sympathy. She too had felt the curb of an alien life! — she could almost have held out her hand to him as to a comrade in captivity.

Outside the station, to Laura's surprise — considering the object of the expedition — Hubert made a sign to his sister, and they two dropped behind a little.

"What's the matter with her?" said Hubert abruptly, as soon as he judged that they were out of hearing of the couple in front.

"Who do you mean? Laura? Why, she's well enoof!"

"Then she don't look it. She's fretting. What's wrong with her?"

As Hubert looked down upon his sister, Polly was startled by the impatient annoyance of look and manner. And how red-rimmed and weary were the lad's eyes! You might have thought he had not slept for a week. Polly's mind ran through a series of conjectures; and she broke out with Westmoreland plainness —

"Hubert, I do wish tha wouldn't be sich a fool! I've towd tha so times and times."

"Aye, and you may tell me so till kingdom come — I shan't mind you," he said doggedly. "There's something between her and the Squire. I know there is. I know it by the look of her."

Polly laughed.

"How you jump! I tell tha she never says a word aboot him."

Hubert looked moodily at Laura's little figure in front.

"All the more reason!" he said between his teeth. "She'd talk about him when she first came. But I'll find out — never fear."

"For goodness' sake, Hubert, let her be!" said Polly, entreating. "Sich wild stuff as thoo's been writin me! Yan might ha thowt yo'd be fer cuttin yor throat, if yo' didn't get her doon here. — What art

tha thinkin of, lad? She'll never marry tha! She doan't belong to us — and there's noa undoin it."

Hubert made no reply, but unconsciously his muscular frame took a passionate rigidity; his face became set and obstinate.

"Well, you keep watch," he said. "You'll see — I'll make it worth your while."

Polly looked up — half laughing. She understood his reference to herself and her new sweetheart. Hubert would play her game if she would play his. Well — she had no objection whatever to help him to the sight of Laura when she could. Polly's moral sense was not over-delicate, and as to the upshot and issues of things, her imagination moved but slowly. She did not like to let herself think of what might have been Hubert's relations to women — to one or two wild girls about Whinthorpe for instance. But Laura — Laura who was so much their social better, whose manners and self-possession awed them both, what smallest harm could ever come to her from any act or word of Hubert's? For this rustic Westmoreland girl, Laura Fountain stood on a pedestal robed and sceptred like a little queen. Hubert was a fool to fret himself — a fool to go courting some one too high for him. What else was there to say or think about it?

At the next street corner Laura made a resolute

stop. Polly should not any longer be defrauded of her Mr. Seaton. Besides she, Laura, wished to talk to Hubert. Mr. Seaton's long words, and way of mouthing his highly correct phrases, had already seemed to take the savour out of the morning.

When the exchange was made — Mr. Seaton alas! showing less eagerness than might have been expected — Laura quietly examined her companion. It seemed to her that he was taller than ever; surely she was not much higher than his elbow! Hubert, conscious that he was being scrutinised, turned red, looked away, coughed, and apparently could find nothing to say.

"Well — how are you getting on?" said the light voice, sending its vibration through all the man's strong frame.

"I suppose I'm getting on all right," he said, switching at the railings beside the road with his stick.

"What sort of work do you do?"

He gave her a stumbling account, from which she gathered that he was for the time being the factotum of an office, sent on everybody's errands, and made responsible for everybody's shortcomings.

She threw him a glance of pity. This young Hercules, with his open-air traditions, and his athlete's triumphs behind him, turned into the butt and underling of half a dozen clerks in a stuffy office!

"I don't mind," he said hastily. "All the others paid for their places; I didn't pay for mine. I'll be even with them all some day. It was the chance I wanted, and my uncle gives me a lift now and then. It was to please him they gave me the berth; he's worth thousands and thousands a year to them!"

And he launched into a boasting account of the importance and abilities of his uncle, Daniel Mason, who was now managing director of the great ship-building yard into which Hubert had been taken, as a favour to his kinsman.

"He began at the bottom, same as me — only he was younger than me," said Hubert, "so he had the pull. But you'll see, I'll work up. I've learnt a lot since I've been here. The classes at the Institute — well, they're fine!"

Laura showed an astonished glance. New sides of the lad seemed to be revealing themselves.

She inquired after his music. But he declared he was too busy to think of it. By-and-by in the winter he would have lessons. There was a violin class at the Institute — perhaps he'd join that. Then abruptly, staring down upon her with his wide blue eyes —

"And how have you been getting on with the Squire?"

He thought she started, but couldn't be quite sure.

"Getting on with the Squire? Why, capitally! Whenever he's there to get on with."

"What — he's been away?" he said eagerly.

She raised her shoulders.

"He's always away ——"

"Why, I thought they'd have made a Papist of you by now," he said.

His laugh was rough, but his eyes held her with a curious insistence.

"Think something more reasonable, please, next time! Now, where are we going to lunch?"

"We've got it all ready. But we must see the yard first. . . . Miss Fountain — Laura — I've got that flower you gave me."

His voice was suddenly hoarse.

She glanced at him, lifting her eyebrows.

"Very foolish of you, I'm sure. . . . Now do tell me, how did you get off so early?"

He sulkily explained to her that work was unusually slack in his own yard; that, moreover, he had worked special overtime during the week in order to get an hour or two off this Saturday, and that Seaton was on night duty at a large engineering "works," and lord therefore of his days. But she paid small attention. She was occupied in looking at the new buildings and streets, the brand new squares and statues of Froswick.

"How can people build and live in such ugly places?" she said at last, standing still that she

might stare about her — "when there are such lovely things in the world; Cambridge, for instance — or — Bannisdale."

The last word slipped out, dreamily, unaware.

The lad's face flushed furiously.

"I don't know what there is to see in Bannisdale," he said hotly. "It's a damp, dark, beastly hole of a place."

"I prefer Bannisdale to this, thank you," said Laura, making a little face at the very ample bronze gentleman in a frock coat who was standing in the centre of a great new-built empty square, haranguing a phantom crowd. "Oh! how ugly it is to succeed — to have money!"

Mason looked at her with a half-puzzled frown — a frown that of late had begun to tease his handsome forehead habitually.

"What's the harm of having a bit of brass?" he said angrily. "And what's the beauty o' livin in an old ramshackle place, without a sixpence in your pocket, and a pride fit to bring you to the workhouse!"

Laura's little mouth showed amusement, an amusement that stung. She lifted a little fan that hung at her girdle.

"Is there any shade in Froswick?" she said, looking round her.

Mason was silenced, and as Polly and Mr. Seaton

joined them, he recovered his temper with a mighty effort and once more set himself to do the honours — the slighted honours — of his new home.

. . . But oh! the heat of the ship-building yard. Laura was already tired and faint, and could hardly drag her feet up and down the sides of the great skeleton ships that lay building in the docks, or through the interminable "fitting" sheds with their piles of mahogany and teak, their whirring lathes and saws, their heaps of shavings, their resinous wood smell. And yet the managing director appeared in person for twenty minutes, a thin, small, hawk-eyed man, not at all unwilling to give a brief patronage to the young lady who might be said to link the houses of Mason and Helbeck in a flattering equality.

"He wad never ha doon it for *us!*" Polly whispered in her awe to Miss Fountain. "It's you he's affther!"

Laura, however, was not grateful. She took her industrial lesson ill, with much haste and inattention, so that once when the director and his nephew fell behind, the great man, whose speech to his kinsman in private was often little less broad than Mrs. Mason's own — said scornfully:

"An I doan't think much o' your fine cousin, mon! she's nobbut a flighty miss."

The young man said nothing. He was still slavishly ill at ease with his uncle, on whose benevolence all his future depended.

"Is there something more to see?" said Laura languidly.

"Only the steel works," said Mr. Seaton, with a patronising smile. "You young ladies, I presume, would hardly wish to go away without seeing our chief establishment. Froswick Steel and Hematite Works employ three thousand workmen."

"Do they? — and does it matter?" said Laura, playing with the salt.

She wore a little plaintive, tired air, which suited her soft paleness, and made her extraordinarily engaging in the eyes of both the young men. Mason watched her perpetually, anticipating her slightest movement, waiting on her least want. And Mr. Seaton, usually so certain of his own emotions and so wholly in command of them, began to feel himself confused. It was with a distinct slackening of ardour that he looked from Miss Fountain to Polly — his Polly, as he had almost come to think of her, honest managing Polly, who would have a bit of "brass," and was in all respects a tidy and suitable wife for such a man as he. But why had she wrapped all that silly white stuff round her head? And her hands! — Mr. Seaton slyly withdrew his eyes from Polly's reddened members to fix them on the thin white wrist that Laura was holding poised in air, and the pretty fingers twirling the salt spoon.

Polly meantime sat up very straight, and was no longer talkative. Lunch had not improved her complexion, as the mirror hanging opposite showed her. Every now and then she too threw little restless glances across at Laura.

"Why, we needn't go to the works at all if we don't like," said Polly. "Can't we get a fly, Hubert, and take a jaunt soomwhere?"

Hubert bent forward with alacrity. Of course they could. If they went four miles up the river or so, they would come to real nice country and a farmhouse where they could have tea.

"Well, I'm game," said Mr. Seaton, magnanimously slapping his pocket. "Anything to please these ladies."

"I don't know about that seven o'clock train," said Mason doubtfully.

"Well, if we can't get that, there's a later one."

"No, that's the last."

"You may trust me," said Seaton pompously. "I know my way about a railway guide. There's one a little after eight."

Hubert shook his head. He thought Seaton was mistaken. But Laura settled the matter.

"Thank you — we'll not miss our train," she said, rising to put her hat straight before the glass — "so it's the works, please. What is it — furnaces and red-hot things?"

In another minute or two they were in the street again. Mr. Seaton settled the bill with a magnificent "Damn the expense" air, which annoyed Mason — who was of course a partner in all the charges of the day — and made Laura bite her lip. Outside he showed a strong desire to walk with Miss Fountain that he might instruct her in the details of the Bessemer process and the manufacture of steel rails. But the ease with which the little nonchalant creature disposed of him, the rapidity with which he found himself transferred to Polly, and left to stare at the backs of Laura and Hubert hurrying along in front, amazed him.

"Isn't she nice looking?" said poor Polly, as she too stared helplessly at the distant pair.

Her shawl weighed upon her arm, Mr. Seaton had forgotten to ask for it. But there was a little sudden balm in the irritable vexation of his reply:

"Some people may be of that opinion, Miss Mason. I own I prefer a greater degree of balance in the fair sex."

"Oh! does he mean me?" thought Polly.

And her spirits revived a little.

Meanwhile, as Laura and Hubert walked along to the desolate road that led to the great steel works, Hubert knew a kind of jealous and tormented bliss.

She was there, fluttering beside him, her delicate face often turned to him, her feet keeping step with his. And at the same time what strong intangible barriers between them! She had put away her mocking tone — was clearly determined to be kind and cousinly. Yet every word only set the tides of love and misery swelling more strongly in the lad's breast. "She doan't belong to us, an there's noa undoin it." Polly's phrase haunted his ear. Yet he dared ask her no more questions about Helbeck; small and frail as she was, she could wrap herself in an unapproachable dignity; nobody had ever yet solved the mystery of Laura's inmost feeling against her will; and Hubert knew despairingly that his clumsy methods had small chance with her. But he felt with a kind of rage that there were signs of suffering about her; he divined something to know, at the same time that he realised with all plainness it was not for his knowing. Ah! that man — that ugly starched hypocrite — after all had he got hold of her? Who could live near her without feeling this pain — this pang? . . . Was she to be surrendered to him without a struggle — to that canting, droning fellow, with his jail of a house? Why, he would crush the life out of her in six months!

There was a rush and whirl in the lad's senses.

A cry of animal jealousy — of violence — rose in his being.

"How wonderful! — how enchanting!" cried Laura, her glance sparkling, her whole frame quivering with pleasure.

They had just entered the great main shed of the steel works. The foreman, who had been induced by the young men to take them through, was in the act of placing Laura in the shelter of a brick screen, so as to protect her from a glowing shower of sparks that would otherwise have swept over her; and the girl had thrown a few startled looks around her.

A vast shed, much of it in darkness, and crowded with dim forms of iron and brick — at one end, and one side, openings, where the June day came through. Within — a grandiose mingling of fire and shadow — a vast glare of white or bluish flame from a huge furnace roaring against the inner wall of the shed — sparks, like star showers, whirling through dark spaces — ingots of glowing steel, pillars of pure fire passing and repassing, so that the heat of them scorched the girl's shrinking cheek — and everywhere, dark against flame, the human movement answering to the elemental leap and rush of the fire, black forms of men in a constant activity, masters and ministers at once of this crackling terror round about them.

"Aye!" said their guide, answering the girl's questions as well as he could in the roar — "that's the great furnace where they boil the steel. Now you watch — when the flame — look! it's white now — turns blue — that means the process is done — the steel's cooked. Then they'll bring the vat beneath — turn the furnace over — you'll see the steel pour out."

"Is that a railway?"

She pointed to a raised platform in front of the furnace. A truck bearing a high metal tub was running along it.

"Yes — it's from there they feed the furnace — in a minute you'll see the tub tip over."

There was a signal bell — a rattle of machinery. The tub tilted — a great jet of white flame shot upwards from the furnace — the great mouth had swallowed down its prey.

"And those men with their wheelbarrows? Why do they let them go so close?"

She shuddered and put her hand over her eyes.

The foreman laughed.

"Why, it's quite safe! — the tub's moved out of the way. You see the furnace has to be fed with different stuffs — the tub brings one sort and the barrows another. Now look — they're going to turn it over. Stand back!"

He held up his hand to bid Mason come under shelter.

Laura looked round her.

"Where are the other two?" she asked.

"Oh! they've gone to see the bar-testing — they'll be here soon. Seaton knows the man in charge of the testing workshop."

Laura ceased to think of them. She was absorbed in the act before her. The great lip of the furnace began to swing downwards; fresh showers of sparks fled in wild curves and spirals through the shed; out flowed the stream of liquid steel into the vat placed beneath. Then slowly the fire cup righted itself; the flame roared once more against the wall; the swarming figures to either side began once more to feed the monster — men and trucks and wheelbarrow, the little railway line, and the iron pillars supporting it, all black against the glare ——

Laura stood breathless — her wild nature rapt by what she saw. But while she hung on the spectacle before her, Mason never spared it a glance. He was conscious of scarcely anything but her — her childish form, in the little clinging dress, her white face, every soft feature clear in the glow, her dancing eyes, her cloud of reddish hair, from which her wide black hat had slipped away in the excitement of her upward gaze. The lad took the image into his heart — it burnt there as though it too were fire.

"Now let's look at something else!" said Laura at last, turning away with a long breath.

And they took her to see the vat that had been filled from the furnace, pouring itself into the ingot moulds — then the four moulds travelling slowly onwards till they paused under a sort of iron hand that descended and lifted them majestically from the white-hot steel beneath, uncovering the four fiery pillars that reddened to a blood colour as they moved across the shed — till, on the other side, one ingot after another was lowered from the truck, and no sooner felt the ground than it became the prey of some unseen force, which drove it swiftly onwards from beneath, to where it leapt with a hiss and crunch into the jaws of the mill. Then out again on the further side, lengthened, and pared, the demon in it already half tamed! — flying as it were from the first mill, only to be caught again in the squeeze of the second, and the third — until at last the quivering rail emerged at the further end, a twisting fire serpent, still soft under the controlling rods of the workmen. On it glided, on, and out of the shed, into the open air, till it reached a sort of platform over a pit, where iron claws caught at it from beneath, and brought it to a final rest, in its own place, beside its innumerable fellows, waiting for the market and its buyers.

"Mayn't we go back once more to the furnace?"

said Miss Fountain eagerly to her guide — "just for a minute!"

He smiled at her, unable to say no.

And they walked back across the shed, to the brick shelter. The great furnace was roaring as before, the white sheet of flame was nearing its last change of colour, tub after tub, barrow after barrow poured its contents into the vast flaring throat. Behind the shelter was an elderly woman with a shawl over her head. She had brought a jar of tea for some workmen, and was standing like any stranger, watching the furnace and hiding from the sparks.

Now there is only one man more — and after that, one more tub to be lowered — and the hell-broth is cooked once again, and will come streaming forth.

The man advances with his barrow. Laura sees his blackened face in the intolerable light, as he turns to give a signal to those behind him. An electric bell rings.

Then ——

What was that?

God! — what was that?

A hideous cry rang through the works. Laura drew her hand in bewilderment across her eyes. The foreman beside her shouted and ran forward.

"Where's the man?" she said helplessly to Mason.

But Mason made no answer. He was clinging to

the brick wall, his eyes staring out of his head. A great clamour rose from the little railway — from beneath it — from all sides of it. The shed began to swarm with running men, all hurrying towards the furnace. The air was full of their cries. It was like the loosing of a maddened hive.

Laura tottered, fell back against the wall. The old woman who had come to bring the tea rushed up to her.

"Oh, Lord, save us! — Lord, save us!" she cried, with a wail to rend the heart.

And the two women fell into each other's arms, shuddering, with wild broken words, which neither of them heard or knew.

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